Patricide is Harder than it Looks

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Patricide is Harder than it Looks

by tunafishprincess

Summary

Cloud made a promise to Gaia, believing he would return to the past to stop Sephiroth from erasing Cloud's existence. Unfortunately, things don't go as planned. It didn't help that the Goddess elected to solve the issue of his continued existence through the use of Sephiroth's cells. Couldn't she have made him a bit bigger at least?

When Sephiroth was called to an emergency in Hojo's laboratory, he didn't expect to find the Professor dead, nor was he expecting to walk out a father to a mysterious five-year-old boy. Nor was Shinra, for that matter. Nevertheless, he'll adjust. He hopes.

Shinra's SOLDIERs hadn't expected to babysit Sephiroth's new son, who may or may not be looking to commit patricide.

(AKA Gaia saw Sephiroth needing a family and yeeted Cloud at him like a son-shaped grenade.)

Notes

Disclaimer: Don't own FFVII or any of its characters.

Hey! It's me, back from the dead! Ha, ha, work and writer's block have been crazy, but I'm back with this story! I know, I know, I should update my other stories but Final Fantasy VII hit me like a train and I haven't gotten this inspired in a long time. I finished writing the story last week and will post the chapters every Thursday. It's about 7 Chapters long. I've recently gotten into FFVII from playing the remake and am super excited for the upcoming game out later this month.

I was really inspired to write this from reading AimeeLouWrite's Kid Cloud Aus and Barid's Silvery Clouds and Starlight, which was, in turn, inspired by some art I did a while back. If you haven't, go check out both their works because they're great!

Kudos, Comments, and Bookmarks are greatly appreciated!

Chapter 1

The first sight Cloud saw was the steel ceiling; the second was the ugly gray floor as he emptied his stomach. Nausea rolled around in his stomach like he was on a boat during a hurricane. A heavy migraine settled over him as his mind slowly pieced itself together again. The fact it was ‘again’ made him want to laugh. Still, at least he wasn’t stabbed through Sephiroth’s blade back in Nibelheim. Small mercies, he supposed.

Nonetheless, this wasn’t how he expected this to go. Then again, dying hadn’t been expected either. Cloud shook his head as he steeled himself. He made a promise to Gaia. Time travel, save the world, yadda, yadda, yadda. Something about Sephiroth’s screwing with the past, somehow erasing his existence. Was her sending Cloud back going to correct that? Admittedly, he zoned out after the first ten minutes of her and Aerith’s Lifestream Seminar. In short, kill the bad guys, destroy the reactors, and stop Shinra, he mentally listed.

No biggie, right? He rubbed his aching temples. The pain behind them lessened, allowing him to look around. It wasn’t his hometown of Nibelheim, that was for sure. He studied the other side of the room, realization dawning as he took in the colorful mural behind him: Aerith’s childhood room. He touched the artwork gently. A familiar sadness flooded through him. She was still alive in this timeline. His hand clenched into a fist. He could save her. He could save them all, even if they no longer remembered who he was.

His gaze traveled to the furniture, pausing as he took in their size. His brows furrowed. He hadn’t remembered the room being quite so big. He shook his head, dispersing the thought. He needed to focus on the bigger picture. Gaia sent him back in time to stop Sephiroth. Where that was in time was still undetermined. Considering his location

inside Shinra's home base, the best thing to do would be to get rid of Hojo first. He headed toward the door, pausing as he noticed the knob's much higher placement. How had—He looked down and cursed.

Instead of an adult's battle-hardened hands, he discovered a child's soft, chubby digits. Further down, he saw significantly shorter legs than he remembered. His hands grabbed his cheeks, feeling the baby fat. He scowled.

"Really? Oh, come on," he grumbled, internally kicking himself for not noticing sooner.

His pants and shoes hadn't made the trip through time (why hadn't he noticed that?), leaving him in his sleeveless turtleneck that hung more like a dress. It made his headache all the worse. Frustration boiled underneath his skin.

"Damn it. Just…Damn it."

He clenched his hands into fists. Tears pricked at the edges of his eyes. He wiped them away, surprised at how easily they came out. Anger, fear, sadness—they rested under his skin, threatening to spill over at a moment's notice. Cold fear swept through him. Was this what it was like to be a child? He couldn't remember, which made his headache even worse. Suddenly, he empathized with Marlene and Denzel so much more. This was hard. He mentally pushed back the tide of feelings until his heart beat normally once again. His shoulders relaxed. He knew it wouldn't fix the issue, but it was better than doing nothing and letting it all spill forth.

He looked for First Tsuragi in every corner of the room. Unfortunately, he found it just as missing as the rest of his clothes. He let out an annoyed huff. Well, this was just peachy. His eyes traveled through

the area for possible weapons before settling on a small wood pile. He smiled at the little stick figures young Aerith had crafted. There were only a few that were completed. The remainder was unfinished, likely due to her and her mother's escape, he reasoned. Taking out the largest, he fashioned the stick into a makeshift spear until he could find something metal and hopefully pointy.

Cloud soon discovered his emotions weren't the only thing enhanced as he swung at the door. The loud screech and bending metal quickly informed him that, age aside, he at least retained his mako enhancements. The stick though…He returned to the pile and pulled out a few more, just in case.

A sigh escaped his lips, the voice too high for his liking. One good thing in this dumpster fire of a situation, Cloud mentally reasoned, was that he hadn't lost everything.

"Let's mosey, I guess," he mumbled as he opened the door to face the world.

Turns out, the world sucked. Hard.

An alarm blared against his eardrums as he took in his handiwork.

"Emergency: Evacuate immediately. All Shinra Personnel, please proceed to the nearest fire exit. I repeat, all Shinra Personnel, proceed to the nearest fire exit," a robotic voice instructed above the screaming researchers and burning machinery.

Although the disadvantages weighed heavier, being fun-sized did have some advantages, Cloud thought. On one hand, the cameras were too high to pick up on his movements as he dismantled Hojo's lab. Being low to the ground also allowed him to take out numerous monsters and kneecaps, including Hojo's. On the other hand, being so tiny meant everything took twice as long as it would have otherwise, and his stamina was worse than if he had just run up Shinra's sixty flights of stairs. Cloud wiped the sweat from his brow as he took in the damage, breathing heavily. He was down to one stick, too.

Hojo's laboratory was up in flames, much to his great pleasure. Even better was that breaking Hojo's kneecaps had come with the unintended side-effect of him falling down the stairs onto his escaped creations. While Cloud didn't like to see others get hurt, it felt like karma for the man to get his comeuppance in such a way. The cherry on top of his time-traveling sundae would have been killing Jenova, too, but apparently, the timeline was too early for her to be here. Ah well. She was likely still in Nibelheim, he reasoned. Maybe he could take down the reactor and Jenova in one fell swoop? It would take him a long while to get to his hometown, though, especially on such little legs, which were already burning with exhaustion. He resisted the urge to yawn. Cloud would never admit it, but he would love a catnap right now.

Thundering footsteps broke him out of his musings. Steel boots, by the sound of it. Shinra's infantry must be coming. It wouldn't be easy, but Cloud was still enhanced, so as long as he went for the legs, he should be alright. He readied his stick, shoulders pitching forward. Just as he turned the corner to face them, he froze.

No. Not infantry, he realized in growing horror.

SOLDIER.

Even with the two's backs turned, he recognized them immediately. The first made his heart ache at how young he looked. Zack Fair couldn't be more than fifteen or sixteen. He was dressed in Third Class SOLDIER garb of the time and lacked his distinctive facial scar. Cloud almost gasped aloud as Zack's presence answered his earlier question: Cloud was over a decade into the past. No, more than a decade, he thought since he hadn't met Zack until the man was a First Class. This timeline was way before Nibelheim, before Cloud had even come to Shinra to try out for SOLDIER. Goddess, he looked so innocent, Cloud thought somberly. Untouched by the tragedies that had befallen him.

He pushed down the urge to reach out to his former friend. Cloud Strife didn't exist in this universe. In essence, they were strangers. It would be better for the other never to get tangled up in Cloud's situation.

The second person did not invoke such a nostalgic feeling. A surge of rage flooded his body, followed by freezing terror. The word echoed inside his mind: *Sephiroth* . Flashes of memory overtook him. He hissed. Reunion pulsated in his body, forcing him to step forward before his mind broke free enough to take one back. Cloud mentally berated himself for not being quieter as the two turned around from the noise. He fixed his weapon on the two; his teeth clenched together as he struggled not to see their past selves overlaid by how he remembered them. His headache spiked once more.

A massive staredown ensued. Cloud swallowed, body at the ready. After several seconds of intense silence, Cloud glanced from one to the other at their lack of action. Zack's face was easy enough to read with the wide eyes and o-shape of his mouth that reminded Cloud of a Cactaur. Sephiroth's expression was as frozen as a broken computer screen. However, neither had swung their weapons, which Cloud considered a good sign.

He glanced between his stick and their weapons. It might have worked against spongy researcher bodies, but he doubted enhanced SOLDIER ones would meet the same fate. And just his luck that there weren't any weapons on this floor that he could have used. Thus, hoping to

maximize on their shock, he began a cautious retreat backward, like he had made the wrong turn in the hallway and not caused all the damage in the first place.

Please work, he mentally prayed.

Unfortunately, Zack just had to break out of the trance first as he raced up to Cloud, causing the boy to retreat faster. Why wasn't there an air vent he could fit into somewhere nearby?

"Hey, you!" Zack called as Cloud rounded the turn to the other hallway.

"Stay back. I don't want to hurt you," he warned in his lowest voice. The hallway looped around, but there was a chance they didn't know that and he could seize on that to escape.

"Woah, easy there. I don't want to hurt you either," Zack said, hands up with a crooked smile. The sight sent a wave of nostalgia through Cloud. "My name's Zack. You think you can lower that stick of yours? I promise I won't hurt you."

Cloud hated that he believed those words, because he knew Zack wouldn't, which made it all the worse. "I'm leaving. Don't follow me."

The words were brushed aside as Zack blocked his path, bending down as if to make himself smaller. He smiled brightly, eyes wide and kind. It must be his way of seeming more approachable. Cloud hated that his body calmed down without his permission, the adrenaline high he'd been riding on dispersing like a deflating balloon. Hunger and thirst arose in their place, leaving his senses dull and his emotions heightened. Really, why didn't the Goddess give him an older body? Was this her version of a joke? He reversed course, keeping his front

facing Zack's, lest he get attacked from behind.

Zack tilted his head to the side. "I just got a couple of questions. Oh, Sephiroth, hey—"

Cloud's eyes widened as he realized who he never should have forgotten *was* following behind. The man had snuck up on them, his shadow looming over the two. Cloud jumped to the side, stick raised.

"Sephiroth!" His neck ached as he looked up at the man. He had been chest level before. Now, the top of his head didn't even reach his belt. Not that it mattered; he tried to reason amidst the rising panic in his chest. Cloud had fought WEAPONS and Sephiroth previously. If he just kept his distance, maybe he could run away and face him another day.

It would preferably be when Cloud hit puberty.

The man in question blinked, slit green eyes unperturbed by the anger in the other's voice. "You know my name." He put away his sword. "And yet, I don't know yours."

It was little relief that this Sephiroth didn't have his old memories as the man leaned closer to Cloud.

"You don't deserve it—Put me down!" Cloud yelled shrilly as his nemesis picked him up. Sephiroth took the stick from his hands like it was nothing, repositioning him to his hip like he was a child.

Cloud squirmed, trying to crawl down, but the man's hold was iron-clad. It didn't help that reunion hummed beneath his skin, J-Cells

reactivating to the man's presence. His headache lessened from the physical touch, followed by what Cloud could only describe as his soul being smothered in a warm, fluffy blanket. It was…different than what he was used to, although he didn't welcome the feeling. His heart rate slowed, body involuntarily relaxing in the man's embrace as his inner voice cursed up a storm.

Sephiroth must have also noticed the connection from the look on his face, brows drawn together as he looked Cloud over from head to toe. Zack peered over the man's arm at Cloud.

"He's so small. How old do you think he is, Sir?"

"I am uncertain," he answered slowly.

"I'm twenty-six," Cloud responded. Or, at least, he was before Gaia brought him back through time.

"Twenty-six months?" Sephiroth asked, looking to Zack if that was the correct age, much to Cloud's rising anger. He wasn't a toddler!

He resisted the urge to shudder. Goddess, if he had been a toddler, that would have been worse. Well, not that it could get much worse than being held by his greatest enemy.

"Maybe chronologically, but not physically. He looks like a preschooler to me, Sir," Zack supplied. Cloud almost nodded. He was at least three-and-a-half feet tall. Maybe even more if one counted his hair!

"Professor Hojo's doing, I presume," Sephiroth postulated, lips drawn

into a tight line. “I take it you are the so-called intruder the Director tasked us to find. We discovered the Professor’s body by the stairwell. Your doing, I presume?” Cloud remained silent, refusing to meet Sephiroth’s eyes. The man seemed to take his silence as an answer; however, a soft hum escaped his mouth as he readjusted his hold on Cloud’s body, bringing him closer to his chest.

“You think a kid could have caused this kind of damage?” Zack said.

Sephiroth’s eyes seemed unfocused momentarily before he responded firmly, “Yes.”

Exhaustion tore at the edges of his mind, threatening a forced sleep if he didn’t cool it. Cloud grumbled in Sephiroth’s hold. As much as he would like to kill the man, this was not the time or place. Cloud let out a slight cough as the smoke grew heavier in this area. Sephiroth’s hold tightened as he turned around, heading for the elevator. “We should leave before the Turks get here. Text the Director to meet us on the next floor. I have a feeling this will involve a lot of paperwork.”

Zack matched the man’s step. “Sir, do you think this kid might be related to you somehow? He’s got your hair color, and your eyes are similar, too,” Zack mentioned.

“What?” Cloud grasped his bangs to get a better look and blanched. Silver hairs gathered in his fingers before he released them in shock. A shudder ran down his spine. He dared not look at the green glass tubes of mako surrounding them, afraid to confirm what he suspected were those snake-like eyes that had haunted him for years. The Goddess’s words echoed through his mind.

You didn’t exist, but I found another way.

She found another way his *ass*. Cloud punched Sephiroth's chest in frustration, yet the man's muscles were like granite. A headache flared up in response, making the boy groan as blood pounded against his temples. Great, so he couldn't even hurt his nemesis now? Sephiroth ran a hand through his hair as if to soothe him. Cloud wished he could swing at the hand, but it was futile. The rest of Sephiroth's features might be neutral, but his eyes were searching, analyzing every bit of Cloud with barely concealed curiosity. He only hoped that particular curiosity didn't include a pointy sword through his chest.

"That he does," Sephiroth replied "I…I wasn't expecting this."

"Release me," Cloud demanded in his best SOLDIER voice.

The two pointedly ignored him. Cloud inwardly fumed.

"We need to get him to medical. His feet are bleeding from the broken glass," Sephiroth noted.

Cloud wanted to reply that it was from all the kneecaps he broke but wisely kept quiet, stewing in his anger and ongoing misery of being held like a toddler.

"Who would bring a kid in here in the first place?"

"Perhaps he wasn't brought in here," Sephiroth said softly. His grip tightened around Cloud. "Perhaps he was *made*, like me."

"Oh shit. So he's like a tiny version of you, then? A clone?"

“Medical can run a full blood work. We will find out there.” Sephiroth’s footsteps quickened. Cloud’s head bobbed with the movement as he tried to figure out what was happening.

“Woah, what if he’s your kid or something?” Zack laughed. “Wouldn’t that be crazy?”

Sephiroth paused midstep, expression unreadable. Cloud’s eyes widened as his mind returned to what the Goddess said. Oh hell no. She didn’t…He looked back up at the silver locks. Not a sliver of blond in sight. He slumped forward as the shock took hold.

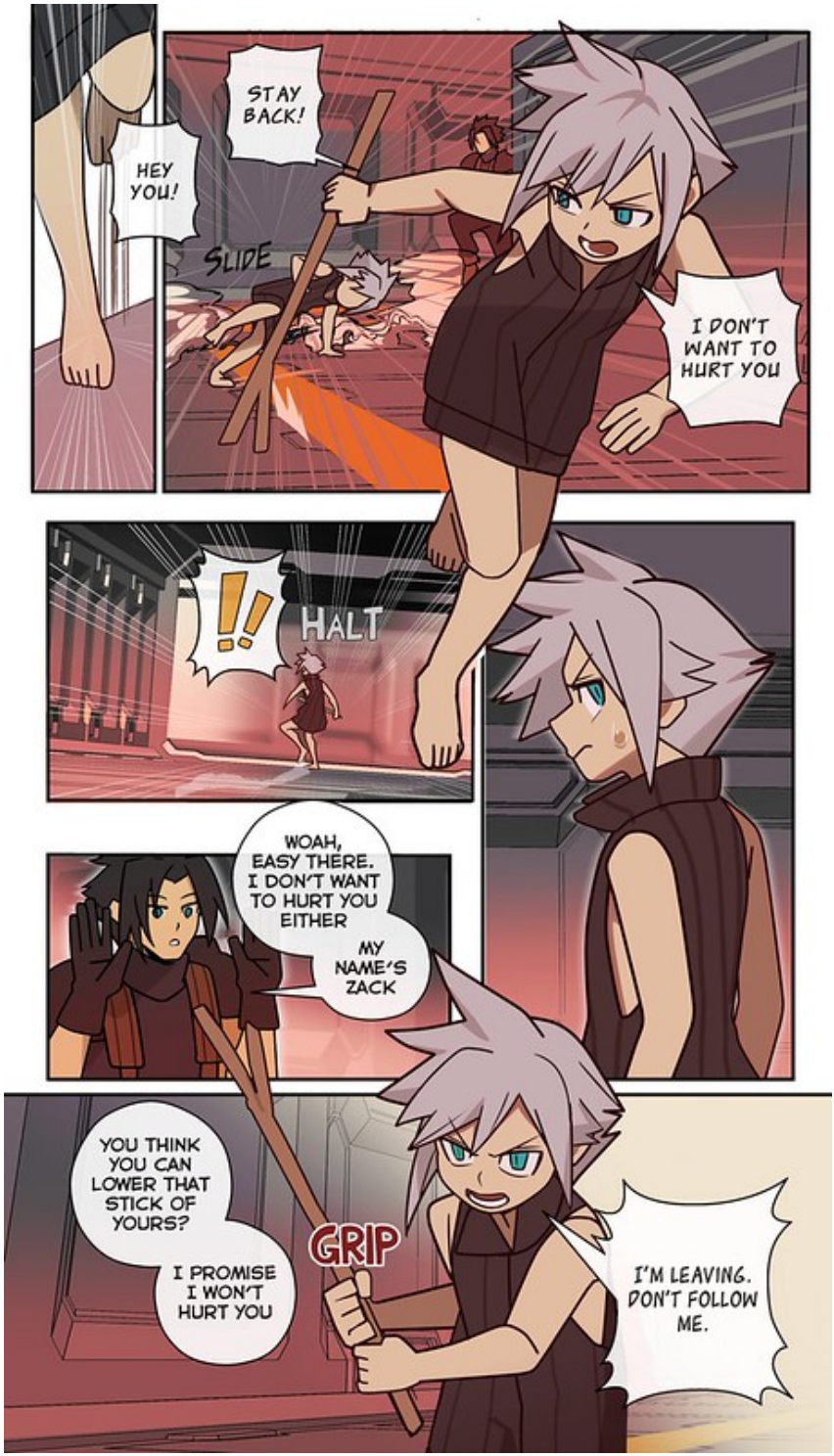
“That is unlikely, but I don’t doubt that there is a connection somewhere,” Sephiroth interrupted, throwing another glance at Cloud. He still hadn’t stopped brushing Cloud’s hair with his fingers. What was he, a damn cat? “Contact the Director while I take the boy to Medical, Third Class Fair.”

“What should I say? I don’t think he’s going to believe a toddler murdered the guy,” Zack said dubiously.

Cloud’s eyes narrowed at the tiny arch in Sephiroth’s lips. Was that a hint of a smile? “An escaped experiment then.”

Comic by the lovely Fruitloopchan. Check them out on Twitter!

EMERGENCY EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY
ALL SHINRA PERSONNEL PROCEED TO THE NEAREST FIRE EXIT
I REPEAT ALL SHINRA PERSONNEL PROCEED TO THE NEAREST FIRE EXIT
Sephiroth Lv.99
Snek
MP
Limit
Zack Lv.16
Puppy
MP
Limit
Limit
Magic
Item
Flee
Cloud Lv.5
Baby boy
MP
Limit
You fled.


HEY YOU!
STAY BACK!
SLIDE
I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU
!!
HALT
WOAH, EASY THERE. I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU EITHER
MY NAME'S ZACK
YOU THINK YOU CAN LOWER THAT STICK OF YOURS?
I PROMISE I WON'T HURT YOU
GRIP
I'M LEAVING. DON'T FOLLOW ME.

I JUST GOT A COUPLE QUESTIONS
OH, SEPHIROTH, HEY—
SEPHIROTH!
DISTANCE
YOU KNOW MY NAME
AND YET, I DON'T KNOW YOURS
YOU DON'T DESERVE IT—
SWING
PUT ME DOWN!
SWING

Like the story and wanna talk about it? Great! Check out my discord HERE.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Zack babysits Cloud

Chapter Notes

Hey! Oh wow, I was not expecting this much wonderful feedback! Thank you! I sincerely appreciate all the kudos, bookmarks and comments. Seriously, ya'll have made my day. I hope you enjoy this new chapter! I love writing Zack, he's so fun.

Zack Fair was already buzzing with energy the instant he woke up. The morning sun barely peeked above the horizon before he was out of bed and on his way to the medical floor. He paced back and forth inside the elevator, doing a few squats to stem the nervousness. Questions flew through his mind at a record pace. Was the kid an experiment of Hojo's? How had he ended up there in the first place? Should he really be going to check on him?

Even though his mission was over, Zack felt an urge to go see the kid. The poor boy had looked so lost and confused, and—as a hero-in-training— Zack couldn't just leave him alone (well, technically with Sephiroth, but the boy didn't seem all that enthused about the man). Plus, the Director did ask him to check on the General after last night's mission debrief, Zack internally reasoned, so he had a valid reason to visit, right? Right.

The elevator dinged.

Sweat trickled down his temple. Zack only met the General once before this whole fiasco, and well…it would be a lie to say he wasn't intimidated. Hell, he was *still* intimidated. General Sephiroth had an

air about him that screamed unapproachable. When the two ran into each other on the way to the Lab for an emergency mission, Zack spent most of the time internally freaking out until the kid showed up.

Speaking of the kid, the medical floor of Shinra Tower was abuzz with activity, and doctors and nurses were dealing with the aftermath of yesterday. No one had died, well, except for Professor Hojo. Zack wasn't too surprised by the lack of sadness for the man, especially with how he treated SOLDIERs and lab technicians. No doubt Shinra would quickly replace him. Zack heard whispers of Wutai in the hallways, which made him snort. He was pretty sure the kid did all the damage, although he doubted Shinra would be willing to disclose that information lest it make them the town's laughingstock. No, if there was one thing Shinra valued, it was their reputation. It wouldn't do for them to have lost an entire floor to a rampaging toddler, even if that toddler looked like the General.

It didn't take him long to find the man sitting quietly in one of the chairs outside a patient room. Even though Sephiroth wasn't doing anything, Zack could feel his suffocating presence throughout the long hallway. The nurses and doctors snuck looks over their clipboards at Shinra's most infamous SOLDIER, staying clear of the man as they whispered amongst each other. Zack shuffled past them.

"General, Sir!" He said with a quick salute, forgetting to bring his legs together as he did so. Damn it. He mentally kicked himself at the sloppiness of it but, thankfully, wasn't called out for it by the man.

General Sephiroth waved him off. "At ease. Third Class Fair, correct? What time is it?"

"oh-seven hundred, sir," Zack replied, taking a quick peak around the door before looking back at his commanding officer. "Er, General—"

“Call me Sephiroth.”

“Understood, Si–Sephiroth, sir,” Zack sputtered, trying to get back on track. He scratched the back of his neck sheepishly. “You can call me Zack.” His gaze traveled from the floor to the man, worry starting to etch into his brow. “So, um, are *you* okay?”

A wave of emotions flickered across Sephiroth’s face so quickly Zack didn’t have time to decipher what they could mean. A moment later, a strange sound left the older man’s lips. It took Zack a second to realize it was laughter. Sephiroth’s long, tired chuckle echoed through the hallway. The hairs on the back of Zack’s neck stood up. It silenced the hushed whispers of the medical staff. Zack froze up, trying to get a read on the situation. Up close, Sephiroth was…not looking his military finest if the tousled hair and bloodshot eyes were anything to go by. Even his trademark coat was askew.

“That depends on your definition of *okay*,” Sephiroth replied, brow creased. “Yesterday, I was summoned to deal with an intruder in the labs.” He paused, another flash of emotion crossing his features before it disappeared. He pinched the bridge of his nose before he continued, “Today, I have discovered I am a *father*.”

Zack took a moment to absorb the information before exclaiming, “Oh shit! You mean I was actually right? I was joking!”

“Your *joke* is currently sleeping in the other room.” The General steepled his hands beneath his chin as he scanned the hallway for passersby. In a quieter voice, he added, “All those in SOLDIER are sterile, but it seems Professor Hojo found a workaround.” His gaze flickered over to the room’s entrance. “We haven’t found any record of Cloud in the systems.”

“His name is Cloud? ” said Zack as he stepped into the patient room,

looking at the sleeping child on the bed inside. “Aw, it suits the little guy.”

He did look like a fluffy cloud, his hair framing his face and almost blending into the white pillow they placed him on. The black sweater dress he wore yesterday was replaced with a small hospital gown and pants, making the boy look even younger than he first appeared. A soft snore left his mouth, hair fluttering around him as he breathed. It pulled at Zack’s heartstrings. So cute. No wonder people had kids.

“It came out by accident. Cloud is quite the little fighter, especially when the Doctors came around,” Sephiroth remarked offhandedly, drawing Zack’s attention away from the room. “I’m unsure if he had any other subject designation like I did. I suspect the Professor hid the information elsewhere or destroyed it so no one could find it, hence the lack of system data. Although, this is all merely speculation,” Sephiroth explained, hands gripped together tightly, shoulders haunched over. “Either way, Cloud exists and is now my responsibility.”

“Your responsibility?” Zack was momentarily speechless in his surprise. “You’re keeping him?”

Sephiroth nodded, rising to his full height as he did so. Zack quickly sidestepped out of the way as the man walked inside.

Despite Sephiroth’s naturally imposing figure, he seemed almost lost in the small room, shoulders drawn tight and forward. Zack resisted the urge to pat the guy on the back like he would with his fellow Thirds. He wasn’t as close as Angeal and Genesis, so he wasn’t sure if the man would appreciate the act. He settled for a small smile at the man.

“The President came down earlier. Tried to persuade me to leave him

to the Science Department," Sephiroth stated, expressionless.

"What did you tell him?"

"I refused," he answered, arms folded. "The President yielded fairly quickly to my idea when I pointed out that the amount of damage to the Laboratory and Hojo's subsequent death are more pressing matters to deal with than a volatile experiment, especially one that would be under the control and jurisdiction of SOLDIER."

Zack raised an eyebrow at the clinical nature Sephiroth explained everything. "So Cloud's just an experiment to you?"

"Of course not, Zack. Don't be obtuse," he chastised, giving him a look that made Zack instinctively duck his head. "I've spent my whole life under Shinra. You won't survive long if you bear your emotions on your sleeve. Remember that if you ever want to rise in the ranks. Honestly." He stepped towards the boy's bed, gently touching the child's hair. His gaze softened, or at least it seemed that way to Zack. He watched as the man slowly picked up the sleeping child, careful not to wake him. "Cloud is my son, my *only* biological family. No doubt the President is already thinking of a way to capitalize on it."

Zack paled at the words. He…he hadn't known Sephiroth had no family up until now. The earlier puzzle pieces suddenly forming a picture in his mind. Hadn't Sephiroth said he was made in the labs yesterday too? He couldn't imagine life without his ma and pops or growing up under Shinra.

Shit. He should lighten the mood somehow. Zack rackled his thoughts for a way to turn the conversation to something else.

"You know, this is the most I've ever spoken with you before," Zack

said without thinking. “Fuck, I didn’t mean to say that. I mean—”

“Such a puppy. Angeal was right: you do speak your mind quite often, don’t you?”

“Sorry.” Zack’s face grew hot. It wasn’t like Zack was wrong in his statement though! He knew Angeal and Genesis were on friendlier terms with the man, but it still shocked him how different the man yesterday was from today. He handled Cloud like he was made of glass, softly caressing his face when the boy fussed in his sleep. He heard fatherhood affected each man differently, but he’d never seen someone fall so seamlessly into the role.

“No need to apologize. I am…feeling chatty, as Genesis likes to say. Perhaps it is because I’m completely out of my element. I wasn’t around children my age growing up and haven’t spent much time with them as an adult, so this has been quite the experience.” He held the boy closer. “There was a connection when I first held him. I suppose this is what people call a *parental bond*.” He looked down at the child with what Zack swore was fondness. “He snored on my shoulder until we arrived down here.”

As they left the room and made their way to the elevator, Zack couldn’t help but ask, “How’s the little guy handling all this?”

The question almost seemed to rouse the sleeping child in the man’s arms. Sephiroth silently brushed the boy’s hair with his fingers until he sighed softly, returning to the land of sleep once more.

“Not well,” Sephiroth said dryly. “He destroyed the first medical room when he woke up and tried to spear me with an IV pole.” Zack’s eyes widened at Sephiroth’s half-smile as if Cloud’s actions were a humorous anecdote and not incredibly worrisome. “After his little tantrum, he passed out again and has been like this ever since.”

“So what are you gonna do now?”

Sephiroth paused, brow creasing. “My apartment is not suitable for children. I will need to childproof the place. I spent most of the night reading childcare books and research papers on my PHS, but most are worthless. Still, the mission objectives are clear enough: I need to get food, perhaps supplements too since he’s quite skinny. There’s also the issue of clothing and furniture.” He let out a soft hum. “I wrote a list, but I haven’t had the time to go and buy things yet.” He frowned, hand playing with one of the tufts on Cloud’s head. “I will likely need to take him with me, but I don’t trust Cloud to stay put. Perhaps I need a handler.” His brow creased. “Wait, the correct word is babysitter, yes? Hm. It would be hard to find someone I trust with him, however. No one outside of SOLDIER for the time being at least.”

“What about asking Genesis and Angeal?” Zack inquired.

“They are out on blackout missions.” He tilted his head to the side, eyes cast on the floor. His frown deepened. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to burden them.”

“I can watch the kid while you do that, ya know. It’s no biggie,” Zack offered.

Sephiroth swerved to look at him. “Truly?”

He gave the teen an unimpressed lookover. Zack tried not to look insulted. Yeah, he was young, but he was good with kids! No, *great*! He babysat all the time in Gongaga. “I can totally do it. Besides, you sure you wanna leave him with someone unenhanced?”

Sephiroth looked between Zack and Cloud before answering, “A fair point, Fair.”

Zack’s jaw dropped as the elevator doors opened. “Did…Did you just make a pun?”

Sephiroth didn’t grant him a response.

It was late morning by the time the kiddo awoke. In the meantime, Zack was chilling out on Sephiroth’s leather couch while flipping through the channels on his television that would have cost, like, half a year of Zack’s paychecks. All it was missing was a gaming system. Overall, the place was pretty snazzy, but definitely not childproof, especially with the cool-ass weapons display in the living room. They looked Wutaian in nature from long, elegant katanas to small, brutal shurikens. In other words, a teenage boy like Zack’s dream setup. He took a picture and sent it off.

Kunsel and the other Thirds were gonna be *so* jelly. He found the General had more than one copy of his infamous coat too. Made sense, he thought, considering how much wear and tear it probably went through in battle. Was it wrong to snap a picture of him wearing it for the guys? Yes. Was that going to stop him? Nah. He immediately put the coat up though, not wanting to suffer Sephoroth’s wrath if he damaged it. Most of the morning he spent there lounging though. Compared to his regular missions this was heaven.

The pitter-patter of little feet drew his attention away from the television. Zack didn’t even have time to open the bedroom door before the kid smacked right into his legs, nearly taking both of them

to the ground. Still, Zack held fast, picking the boy up. Were all kids this light?

Cloud blinked owlishly, rubbing at his eyes. Aw. It made Zack wish he had begged his parents a little more for a younger sibling. He reached up to touch Zack's cheeks. Zack grinned at the boy, hoping it was friendly enough.

Then the kid bawled. Like, hard.

"Oh shit, you okay?" Zack brought the kid to the couch, trying to calm him down like he used to do with the neighbor's kids. Kids liked songs, right? How did that dog song go again? "Uh, bow-wow-wow, woof, woof, he's a good dog who never stops, keeping the city safe for each and everyone, um, go all out, go all out, little Stamp!"

Shit, he fucked that up didn't he?

Between the tears the boy gasped, "Zack!"

"That's right! I'm Zack," he said as he bounced the kid on his knee. "And you're Cloudy, right? What a great name! It suits you."

Wrong thing to say, apparently. The kid bawled even harder, tears wetting Zack's shirt as his whole body shook. Zack rocked him back and forth, rubbing his back as he whispered the same dog song. The movement shifted the kid's hospital gown, revealing several scars on the boy's back that made Zack's eyes grow wide. He knew Shinra did stuff but this…

Zack swallowed back the bile building inside his throat. His mind

played through everything over the past twenty-four hours. What had this kid gone through in the labs? It boiled his blood to think about it. Zack didn't have much experience with trauma in children, but he knew enough adults with it in SOLDIER. His jaw clenched. It was a good thing the Professor was dead, otherwise Zack might have been the one to do him in.

It took another hour until the sobs turned to sniffles. When Cloud's head finally rose, Zack smiled brightly down at him. Unlike the General's sharp pupils, the boy's were more akin to a cat's, changing as his emotions settled down. Cloud placed an open palm to his cheek.

"You're so young," Cloud said in awe.

Zack chuckled. "Not as young as you."

"I'm not young," he huffed, crossing his arms as he looked down at himself and grumbled. He scrambled off Zack as he scanned the room, reminding Zack of a curious kitten. "Where are we? Where's Sephiroth?"

"We're in the General's apartment until he comes back from shopping," Zack stated as he followed Cloud around the apartment.

"We have to leave! He'll kill us," Cloud stressed, eyeing one of the display swords. Before he reached it Zack picked him back up, carrying him away from the pointy objects.

"Nah, the General's not so bad once you get to know him a bit." He eyed the kitchen to the left of the living room, an idea forming. "Hey, do you want anything?"

“I want to kill Sephiroth,” he said petulantly.

“Well, I don’t think we have patricide stocked in the kitchen,” he replied as they entered the room. Zack deposited the boy in one of the higher chairs as he checked out the guy’s refrigerator.

“Patricide? He’s not my father. This isn’t a joke, Zack.” Cloud stood up on the chair, arms crossed. “Stop treating me like a child.”

The kid’s stomach gurgled loudly enough that even an unenhanced person would hear it. Zack struggled not to laugh as the boy’s face flushed.

“Sit down for a second and calm down,” Zack said. “Why do you need to kill Sephiroth? Did the scientists tell you that?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” Cloud mumbled, hugging his legs.

Zack shrugged, straightening back up when the refrigerator held nothing. The cabinets didn’t have anything either, which meant he would need to secure food another way. “Try me.”

Cloud looked up at him from under his bangs, expression serious.

What Zack believed would be a short explanation turned into an imaginative epic that Zack knew, if in written form, would have made lots of gil for creativity. Aliens and Ancients? Childish, sure; who else would have a robot cat and a talking red cat-dog as companions if not

for a kid? Nevertheless, Zack was hooked on the plot and the characters. Cloud was enthusiastic about his telling, using hand gestures as the story grew longer and more complicated. He especially loved how Cloud even thought of bringing Zack into the story as a tragic hero even though he barely knew him. Apart from him and Sephiroth, the rest of the characters lacked names, referred to instead by their titles like Red Catdog and Materia Thief. When Zack asked why, Cloud said it was for privacy reasons. Zack wasn't sure why made-up characters had privacy, but he totally respected the kid's commitment to the story.

It reminded Zack of his childhood, making up cool adventures and acting them out with the other kids on his street. He inwardly smiled at the memories, like the one where he was a cool pro-athlete whose world got destroyed and became bodyguard to a magical sorceress, which was normally played by one of the neighbor's cats because no one else had two colored eyes and damn it if Zack wasn't going to be as true to his character as he could be. Still, Zack could pick up on the pieces of truth hidden in, even for a guy like him who wasn't exactly book smart.

He drew himself back from his musings as he took in the new little origami creatures Cloud made from Sephiroth's napkins to represent his imaginary friends. One would almost believe it was real if it weren't for the little gaps of information Cloud couldn't answer, although Zack avoided poking too many holes in the plot. Honestly, with everything the kid put together, Zack could see it being written out in two—no— *three* books.

His heart lurched at how lonely the kid must have been. Even his character's backstory was sad and perhaps a clue into how he lived in the labs. Being alone and isolated from others was not how any kid should grow up. Zack grew somber as Cloud revealed he couldn't even remember his mom's name, despite trying to during his explanation to Zack. The look on the boy's face at the realization that he couldn't even remember her face made Zack's heart hurt even more. He gathered the kid to his chest, holding him close. Cloud accepted his hug, though he looked confused.

“You’ve been through a lot, Cloudy,” Zack comforted.

Cloud stared up at him, bewildered. “You’re taking this much better than I thought you would be.”

“I know it might be hard for you to believe, but the General isn’t going to kill you or me.” Cloud threw him a dubious expression as Zack added, “You know, before all this, I thought he was kind of scary too, but he’s actually not as bad as you think. He stayed at the medical ward all last night to ensure you were okay. Maybe you should give him a chance, like a trial period.”

Cloud frowned, turning his head. “He doesn’t deserve a trial period.”

“Well, you said this is the past, right? Maybe things could be different this time,” Zack pointed out in a happy tone. “Maybe that’s why the goddess sent you back.”

Cloud’s eyes narrowed, reminding Zack of his father. “You don’t believe me at all, do you?”

Something in Zack’s expression must have belayed the truth because Cloud huffed, pushing himself out Zack’s hold. He slumped into his chair, legs kicked up on the table.

Zack ruffled the boy’s hair. “Aw, don’t look so sad, Cloudy. Listen, you promise not to kill Sephiroth unless he’s done something really bad, and I’ll order us some pizza. You want pizza?”

Cloud looked around the apartment for a few seconds, up to Zack then down at his body with an annoyed grimace. His shoulders dropped, his head leaning against the tabletop as he sighed heavily. “Whatever.”

“Is that a yes?” He drummed his hands on the counter, grinning all the while.

The kid looked up from his pity party, eyes softening as he snorted, “Fine.”

“Aw, you’re a good kid, Cloudy,” he said as he reached for his PHS to call his favorite place. “We’re gonna have lots of fun, just you wait and see.”

Come hang out in my Discord and scream about FFVII Rebirth with me

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Genesis picks up Cloud from preschool. It goes as well as one would expect.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Back with a new chapter! This time it's Genesis POV. Next up will be Angeal's.

Huge thank you for all the kudos, comments, and bookmarks. Seriously, I appreciate them and had no idea so many people liked this premise. Thank you. I hope you enjoy the new chapter! :D

Few people could get under Genesis' skin like Sephiroth could. It irked him that they were *always* compared. Genesis had never been able to beat the man in battle either, much to his chagrin. It didn't help matters that the Silver General was standoffish and cold, an unmovable mountain in human form that didn't deserve his place above them all. Even thinking of the man lit a fire under Genesis's soul. It burned in his chest that Sephiroth got to be the hero and Genesis was sidelined to be the supporting role, despite his unique strengths and years of training.

Still, they were friends, of a sort.

Thus, when Genesis arrived from his most recent mission, he had been fully expecting to challenge his friend once more to determine his worth, not dealing with one of the biggest scandals for the SOLDIER

division in *years* . The Silver General was a *Silver Daddy* ?

Oh.

Oh *my* .

Whatever terrible mood he arrived with quickly vanished. Genesis soaked up the juicy gossip like a sponge. The news media surrounded him as soon as he stepped out of Shinra HQ and followed him around Midgar. It didn't matter that Sephiroth was the topic because of the stories they had fed him. By the end, he was stuffed to the brim with schadenfreude. This was the tea he *lived* for. Sephiroth's perfect image being dragged through the mud made his issues of inferiority disappear in seconds.

He indulged in interviews with Shinra's most prominent newspapers and magazines regarding his absolute *shock* in the morning hours of his arrival before planting himself on Sephiroth's desk that afternoon to await his rival's return. Angeal even joined him, albeit reluctantly. Genesis didn't care one way or another. He was here for the drama, with or without an audience.

Angeal paced back and forth, brows furrowed even deeper than normal. "This is ridiculous."

"And yet you're still here," Genesis drawled, taking a sip from the tea he brought. They may be childhood friends, but their differences were substantial enough that it made Genesis want to pull his hair out sometimes.

"We should allow him to come to us," advised Angeal. "Ganging up on him like this…it isn't honorable. Perhaps we should instead approach him quietly about this."

“When has Sephiroth ever come to us with his problems without us pulling it out of him?” Genesis pointed out, gesturing his teaspoon to the entrance. “The door is right there, my friend. You’re welcome to leave.”

Angeal paused, then reluctantly nodded after a moment, a deep sigh escaping his lips. In the meantime, Genesis crossed his legs whilst indulging himself in his drink, mind whirling with possibilities.

It wasn’t long before the man of the hour made his appearance, opening the door slowly, then stopping when he realized someone was inside. Before he could retreat, Genesis thrust open the door with a flourish. He quickly ushered Sephiroth inside, locking the door behind them for good measure. Unlike his normal outfit, their friend decided to wear a hooded cloak, perhaps to shield himself from the press. Genesis’s sharp eyes followed the man as he reluctantly walked to his chair.

“ *Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess* ,” he quoted with a Cheshire grin, “I never imagined *you* for a father.”

Sephiroth’s hand inched toward his sword. Genesis matched the man, his hand settled on his rapier’s handle. If looks could kill he would be six-feet-under right now. Genesis gleefully ate in Sephiroth’s annoyed glare. It wasn’t often, if ever, he had one over the man. Today was going to be a wonderful day, he could feel it.

“Don’t,” Angeal warned them with a long side-eye.

Genesis rolled his eyes, waving him off. “Oh, Angeal, don’t fret. I’m not here to challenge my dearest rival today. The company training room is already occupied.” He touched the area over his heart with his

teacup. “Besides, he seems to have his hands full enough already.”

They looked at Sephiroth intently. The strongest man on Gaia refused to meet their gaze, focusing instead on reorganizing the papers on his desk like a common secretary. Genesis’s focus narrowed as the man sat down in his chair without removing his cloak. Sephiroth was not one to hide himself, especially in his own office. Very curious indeed.

“Is there a reason you two are in my office this afternoon?” Sephiroth said in a frosty manner.

“Of course there is. Why didn’t you tell us?” Angeal asked with a vague hint of disapproval.

“You were on missions. Company protocol dictates us to wait eight hours after long-term missions to contact operatives to allow a reprieve.”

“Spare me the company drivel,” groaned Genesis with returning impatience. “It’s never stopped any of us before.”

Sephiroth’s lips thinned into a narrow line. “How did you find out?”

They stared at each other across a sudden ringing silence. The audacity of this man, Genesis thought darkly.

“It’s all over the damn news,” he stressed, slamming his teacup down. It broke under his enhanced strength, liquid splattering against Sephiroth’s desk. Genesis bit down a curse. That was good tea too. “Shinra didn’t exactly keep it a secret.”

More like they promoted it as the most shocking news of the century. Genesis knew Sephiroth enough to know the man had no secret love life to speak of, but the media certainly crafted one for him. A forbidden love, a secret love child, a tragic death—all lies, Genesis knew, but entertaining nonetheless. As much as Genesis loved being in the spotlight, a scandal of this scale was one he definitely had no interest in, apart from playing the shocked friend on the news, of course. Now *that* was fun.

He drew closer and closer to his friend, like a cat on the prowl.

“I see. I didn’t know.” Sephiroth paused. “I’ve been busy.”

“Busy indeed,” Genesis whispered before striking, flipping up the man’s hood before the man quickly pulled it back over. It was all over in the flash of a second, but a second was enough for them to see it. “I must say, though, the *pink* , while lovely, does not compliment your complexion well.”

Sephiroth clenched his mouth tighter, eyes flashing with the promise of pain. “You are testing my patience.”

Genesis laughed. Testing *his* patience? Truly, the Goddess must be laughing at them from above right now.

“Genesis!” Angeal chided, dragging him away from the other man. “Sephiroth, you’re our friend. We don’t mean to pry, but this is some pretty important news. We only wish to help. You look exhausted.”

Genesis pulled away from his friend’s grasp but concurred, saying, “Angeal is right. You look like shit.”

“I didn’t say that,” Angeal retorted with an elbow into the other’s side.

“No, Genesis is right. I do,” Sephiroth sighed, rubbing his tired eyes. “It’s only been a few weeks, however with work and everything else in my life…I’m running at a suboptimal rate. I imagine even *Genesis* could defeat me right now.”

Genesis pursed his lips together at that dig, but as he was about to retort, Angeal gave him a warning glare. He settled for sitting back on top of the man’s desk.

“Still, I wish you had told us,” Angeal said softly. “We’re your friends. The fact that I had to find out from Zack, my student, instead of you… it hurts that you didn’t come to us.”

“I see. I may have miscalculated then. It was an error on my part not to contact you two sooner,” said Sephiroth, looking away.

“It was indeed,” Angeal replied softly.

Genesis froze up, processing his words. Was…was that *almost* an apology? From the man who rarely, if ever, apologized?

He glanced at the window to see if the end was near. When he discovered it wasn’t, he fixed his attention back to him.

Sephiroth sat forward, hands pressed together like an open book. He looked downwards in a way Genesis was shocked to discover appeared

almost vulnerable but it disappeared as quick as it came, back behind his impenetrable mask.

“It’s true. I have a son. We found him after he destroyed the Professor’s lab. I suspect the Professor was trying to make a failsafe or a second me, I don’t know since there aren’t any records.” Sephiroth let out a dry laugh, pulling out a few strands of hair from underneath his hood. “As you can see, Cloud is challenging to say the least. He has tried to kill me several times, and when that failed, he resorted to pranks. Anything to get under my skin. But as frustrating as it is, I cannot blame him for his reaction. He’s in the process of testing my boundaries according to my research.”

Genesis had to fight his own battle of personal restraint because the image in his head was positively glorious. Sephiroth was such a stickler for the rules and followed whatever Professor Hojo wanted for years and his offspring had completely upended that. Genesis snorted. A pity the Professor died under such ‘mysterious’ circumstances.

“To be raised in the labs and then placed with a parent who he doesn’t know, I can’t imagine the difficulty that presents,” Angeal commiserated, placing a hand on Sephiroth’s shoulder.

“To think our fierce Silver General has been brought down by a murderous toddler,” Genesis couldn’t help but add.

“Well, he’s physically five according to medical, but he said he was twenty-six months, so–”

“That was a joke, Sephiroth. I’m trying to lighten the mood.” Genesis replied dryly, shaking his head. “As fun as it is to see my eternal rival this frazzled, it is not as if I don’t *care* . My friend, let us *help* you. What needs to be done?”

Now, Genesis loved to annoy Sephiroth as much as the next guy. In fact, he lived for it. Still, this was clearly a huge life change, not just for him, but for *all* of them. The invincible Sephiroth now had a weakness: a son. It didn't take an expert to figure out the ramifications of this would be massive for the rest of the SOLDIER program as well.

Sephiroth mulled over their words as he looked over his office. In a quiet voice, he responded, "I'm behind on everything. The Director has a mandatory meeting scheduled today that I haven't prepared for at the same time Cloud's preschool gets out. There is no chance to move it. My attendance is required. I cannot be at both places at once."

"You can't send one of the secretaries to fetch him?" Genesis suggested.

"Cloud is enhanced and likes to run away," he sighed, rubbing at his eyes.

"Why not a Turk?" Angeal asked.

They gave him a dubious look.

Angeal rolled his shoulders with a look of determination. "Right, so someone from SOLDIER then."

"Then it's settled. Angeal can help you with the paperwork and the meeting. I can pick up Cloud," Genesis stated.

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "You?"

"Yes, me," he said, placing both hands on his waist. "Do you have anyone else in mind?"

Now, Genesis could technically do the meeting preparation, but that was boring, and out of the three of them, Angeal had the most support in SOLDIER.

"Angeal, is your student still in Junon this week?" Sephiroth asked with what Genesis could only describe as a look of quiet desperation. Genesis glared.

"Yes, he'll be there until Sunday cleaning out some monster nests, why?"

Sephiroth sat silently in deep thought, hands brought together as if in deep prayer. Genesis waited, almost half expecting the man to refuse. Sephiroth was a prideful man, after all. Nevertheless, after a minute, he responded, "Fine."

Genesis grinned.

The preschool was located near the heart of Midgar in Sector One. It was easy to get to on foot via the train from Shinra Tower while still being well-fortified with tall concrete walls and cameras to keep

Shinra's next best and brightest generation safe from the riff-raff of the world. Surrounded by upper-middle-class housing and world-class hospitals, it was little wonder why Sephiroth chose this place.

It didn't take him long to find the General's spawn. Like Sephiroth, he had silver hair and catlike eyes, albeit in a bluer shade than his father's. That was where the similarities ended, however. His hair stuck out in odd angles, defying gravity in their tuffs. He was also dreadfully short and skinny, almost comically so. Maybe something he inherited from his mother perhaps? The preschooler's uniform, copied after Shinra's infamous maritime fleet, appeared absolutely adorable on the tiny child. Clearly, Sephiroth had some taste in fashion apart from his love affair with the color black. Although, he was pretty sure the boy was supposed to be inside the school and not sneaking over the wall like he was now.

Genesis lay in wait, opening up his copy of Loveless as the boy got down from the tall ledge. "R *ipples form on the water's surface, the wandering soul knows no rest* ," he quoted, startling the boy after he landed on the ground. "Where might little Cloud be scampering off to, hm?"

Cloud glared, but in the sailor hat and outfit, the look had little effect on Genesis. "Who are you?"

Genesis bowed at his waist. "Commander Genesis Rhapsodos, the Red Mage of Shinra, SOLDIER First Class, at your service. Your father sent me to pick you up from school," he said whilst gesturing his head toward the other direction, "which I believe is down there according to my PHS." He tilted his head. "Might I ask what warrants your little jailbreak?"

"No and he's not my—" He stopped, shaking his head. "I'm not a child. I don't need to go to school," he contested.

Oh, this boy. No wonder Sephiroth was at his wit's end. Genesis struggled not to laugh behind his book. "Unfortunately, Midgar law disagrees with that. You'll have to bring it up with the Mayor."

"That's not how it was in the Lower Plates," the kid mumbled.

"We're in the Upper Plates, darling," he said, daring to pat the boy on the head, which quickly earned him an annoyed slap and angry look. Genesis openly laughed. It was like dealing with an irritable kitten. "Besides, it's rather standard in most parts of this world that children be in school until the age of adulthood, which you are far from, despite your oh so eloquent speech."

"Shut up," the kid snapped, turning in the other direction. " I'm leaving."

Genesis followed quickly behind, matching the boy's step. "And leaving where? Do you think the Turks aren't watching us right now? You won't get far, despite what you may think. Shinra has its eyes on you. The moment you get far enough from Sephiroth will be the moment the Science Department will come calling."

The boy stopped midstep, clearly thinking over his words. Good. At least he wasn't a total idiot. Sephiroth clearly babied the child, going by how much he let the kid get away with in how he spoke to strangers. Hence, just like with Sephiroth, it would be up to him to drag the boy back to the ground with a reality check.

Cloud stared down at the ground, bottom lip tucked between his front teeth. A part of Genesis felt for the boy. Being raised in a lab did nothing for his sociability. In a way, it reminded him of when he first met Sephiroth, but even he had some training back then. Genesis couldn't imagine how his old friend must have been as a child.

“Then what am I supposed to do?” Cloud asked gently.

“Come with me, of course. At least until your father is done with work,” Genesis said, scooping the child up under one arm. It would be faster this way.

“Put me down!” The boy scowled, twisting in his hold. “Once again, he is not my father.”

“Hm, is that so,” Genesis challenged, flicking a silver bang in front of his eyes.

Cloud quickly pushed it aside. “I don’t normally look like this. I’m blond.”

“If you're blond, then so am I.”

Cloud blinked. “I—Really?”

Genesis barked a laugh as he swung the boy around. This was much more interesting than paperwork. “Oh, sweet goddess, you are just adorable. You two are so alike—You little shit!” Humor turned to annoyance as grubby little paws pulled at his leathers. “That is my coat! Keep your bratty hands off the coat!”

Genesis wheezed as the boy elbowed him under the ribs. A blow like that would have cracked a normal person’s bones, but on Genesis, it would be an uncomfortable bruise. He switched to dangling the boy from his foot, lifting him up until they were eye to eye.

“Take it back. We are not alike!” Cloud growled, his pupils narrowed into thin slivers.

Genesis mulled over his answer before letting out a long, “No.”

Unfortunately, it earned him a kick from the other leg. He caught the second one and frowned.

“By the goddess, you are a handful,” he said. An idea struck him. Genesis smirked deviously as his plan formed. If Sephiroth wasn’t available for their routine battle, then Genesis would just have to make do. “Alright, we’re settling this in the training room.”

“Put me down!” Cloud yelled.

A sharp pain erupted from Genesis’ hand.

“Ow! Did you just bite me?!”

It hadn’t even been an hour, and Genesis already wanted to murder the child. Honestly, for a SOLDIER of his caliber, Genesis liked to think he was rather above the comments of a boy not even half his size. Cloud had been a handful to get to the metro and even worse when they got into the Shinra tower, refusing to come when called

and matching his words like sharp little pokes of the Masamune.

And his teeth…Did all children have such sharp teeth? Genesis internally shuddered.

He came to play the hero, but he was quickly realizing how tempting it was to play the villain.

Still, he promised his friend he would watch the poor boy. Cloud's little feet echoed across Level 49's floors. Genesis noted only a few SOLDIERS were here today, most likely due to the meeting right now. What a perfect opportunity to show the boy his strength, he thought.

"Welcome to Shinra's premier training facility," he said glamorously, "It contains a state-of-the-art weights area, a Virtual Reality training room, a gymnasium, and a secret sauna and spa."

Cloud frowned. "I can't tell if you're joking or not."

"Another thing you and your father share," he noted as he opened the door to the VR room with a flourish.

"Stop calling him that," Cloud stressed.

"Oh? Did I touch a nerve?" He mocked.

"I just…I don't need the reminder," he huffed, looking away. "Everyone keeps comparing me to him already. It's weird. I don't like it."

Genesis stopped midway through the room, turning his head to the side. It hadn't occurred to him that—hm, maybe he misjudged the boy just a tad. Cloud had gone from the proverbial firing pan of Hojo into the fire that was Shinra. Goddess knows how anxiety-inducing that might be when one's world is expanded without explanation. It reminded Genesis of his own childhood, going from the strongest boy around to always being second best to the Silver General no matter what he did.

Perhaps…Cloud was in a similar situation and unable to handle it too. Genesis felt a pang of guilt, a rare occurrence for one such as him. Even at such a young age, he was compared to a man who might forever be his shadow, a legacy he would have to live up to like many men did with fathers of legend. No wonder the boy held such a hatred for the man.

It wouldn't surprise Genesis if the boy was specifically made to take Sephiroth down. All those in SOLDIER were powerful but none more powerful than the three of them. All it took was one of them defecting and poof! There went years of hard work and military success.

"Is that why you keep trying to kill him?" He asked.

"You wouldn't understand. No one does." Cloud kicked at nothing. "I'm not trying to kill him anymore. I promised Zack I would give him a trial period."

"I'm surprised you haven't tried to take out one of us," Genesis said. "You would think the Professor would have you take out Angeal and I considering our importance."

"Not interested." Cloud shrugged. "You're not worth killing. Not like

Sephiroth."

Genesis turned around fully at the words. "Excuse you? I am the Red Mage of Shinra. I am one of Shinra's top SOLDIERS."

Professor Hojo, rest in peace, should have programmed the boy a bit better, in Genesis's opinion. Clearly, his priorities were skewed.

"Yeah, but you're not *the* top," Cloud pointed out. "That's Sephiroth."

Genesis was a strong man, one of the strongest ever, but to hear even he was not on Professor Hojo's threat list irked him. How dare Shinra not consider him a potential threat!

"He's only the top because Shinra made him the poster boy of the Wutai war," Genesis argued.

"No, I'm pretty sure it's because he's the most powerful and could wipe the floor with you," Cloud stated in a matter-of-fact manner.

"And how would you know that?"

The boy lifted a brow as if Genesis were an idiot. "Because Sephiroth is powerful enough and crazy enough to destroy the world?"

"You think I can't go crazy and destroy the world?" He asked, anger rising steadily. "I am plenty formidable."

“No, no, you’re partially right, you’ve got the melodramatic personality and gaudy leather outfit down, but you lack the power he does,” Cloud said, a small smirk forming on his little bratty mouth as though he noticed how much his words got under Genesis’ skin, damn him.

Normally, Genesis believed himself to be quite a level-headed gentleman. As a purveyor of the arts, he had more of his fair share of critics amongst the circles both in and out of Shinra. Nonetheless, he strode on, steadfast in his resolution to be the world’s hero no matter the cost. He had spent most of his life building this foundation, after all.

But this little shit…this toddler was mouthy enough to drive him up the wall. And it was no wonder. As they said in his hometown, the dumbapple did not fall far from the tree.

He continued to the VR station, inputting the location and level. A vast sea of green enveloped them as the blue sky loomed ahead. It was the perfect place to practice with his new materia.

“Let’s play a game,” Genesis started, rolling the small green sphere up and down his arm before catching it mid-air and placing it in his bracelet. “I like to call this one dodgeball. I promise, no weapons. Everything here is artificial, after all.” He smiled. “Try to avoid burning to a crisp, won’t you?”

Cloud seemed to sense the change in the air, taking a step back. “That’s not how dodgeball works.”

Genesis casually shrugged, summoning a roll of small fire balls behind him. He wouldn’t hurt the child, oh no, Sephiroth would kill him for that. But it wouldn’t hurt to test the boy’s reflexes, now would it? Genesis certainly didn’t think so.

He thrust his hand into the air as the match started. “ *Even if the morrow is barren of promises … Nothing shall forestall …*My serve!”

This would likely be the first and last time he was allowed to babysit Cloud, Genesis thought as the fireballs descended upon the boy. He certainly wouldn’t let it end on a sour note.

Well, sour for *him* , at least.

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Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Angeal babysits on accident.

Chapter Notes

Hi! It's Thursday which means new chapter! Oh my gosh, thanks for all the kudos, comments and bookmarks. Like, wow, was not expecting people to like this au as much as they do but thank you, I'm glad you are enjoying the story. I have plans to make a sequel: Family Bonding is Harder than it Looks, but that will be later this year as it is still in progress. For now, I hope you enjoy the chapter.

Angeal enjoyed routine more than most. He tried to keep to it when he could, even on his off days. It kept him grounded amidst the chaos of battle and the lull periods between them. He enjoyed rising early in the morning before the rest of the SOLDIER department, taking to a private training room with a practice sword. It might be silly to some but he found inner peace swinging at imaginary enemies to warm up his muscles before the workday.

The room was secluded from the rest of the SOLDIER floor yet large enough to house a workout area and mats for hand-to-hand training. He had been offered full use of the VR room but declined. Not everything needed to be state-of-the-art and realistic after all. He enjoyed something less high-tech unless he was sparing with Genesis or mentoring Zack. Genesis called him old-fashioned; Angeal preferred the word *traditional* .

His sword sang through the air as he twisted around, slashing at the enemy inside his mind before bringing the blade up and around for the next round of foes. Halfway through his set, he picked up soft footsteps entering the gym. They were cautious, nearly silent to those

without enhanced hearing. He continued into his next set of strikes, although with more attention to his surroundings. A tinge of curiosity dared him to wait and see who the newcomer was. It didn't take him long to find out as he heard a loud thud and hiss.

Angeal slowly turned around, one hand rising to his hip as he viewed the scene. Cloud froze mid-grab for Angeal's prized possession on the ground. The buster sword was supposed to be standing on the opposite side of the room near his gym bag. One part of Angeal was surprised the child could carry such a thing before he remembered the boy's sire. The other part was disappointed at his blatant theft. He raised a brow; his mouth pulled into a stern frown.

"Does Sephiroth know you're here?"

Cloud picked up the sword. It was comically huge in the boy's tiny hands. "I have to train," he insisted, his face the picture of determination. "If I don't and he goes insane again, it will be up to me to stop him."

"Him?" Angeal scratched his chin as realization dawned. Ah, yes, Zack had mentioned something about the boy's *imaginative* projections. "Hm. Sephiroth is not an easy enemy to beat. Even Genesis and I have yet to best him in battle," he said, playing along.

"I know. You never will. That's why I have to get better." He swiped down with the sword, eyes focused in front.

Well. Ouch. Angeal didn't have the intense rivalry Genesis had with Sephiroth, but getting told by a kid point-blank that he would never match the man did hit a bit of a nerve. Unlike Genesis, however, he wasn't so easily provoked.

When the boy wasn't looking, Angeal casually checked his PHS. The amount of messages told him all he needed to know. He quickly texted Sephiroth before placing it back in his pocket, knowing his morning ritual wouldn't resume.

It wasn't the first time Cloud had run away, nor would it be the last, but Angeal knew he needed to keep the boy busy long enough for his friend to get up here. Besides, it couldn't hurt to teach the kid a thing or two, now could it?

"Would you like some pointers?" He offered. "I teach swordsmanship to many in SOLDIER. You can ask Zack. He's been my trainee since his cadet days." He smiled, placing a finger to his lips. "Don't tell him, but the Director and I have spoken about appointing him to Second Class soon."

Cloud relaxed slightly at the mention of his babysitter. Angeal wasn't surprised his pupil had won the boy over. Zack was much like a friendly puppy, charming everyone with his cheerful demeanor and upbeat attitude.

"My lips are sealed," the child said with a hint of a smile. "As for your offer, well, I wouldn't be opposed." He looked down at the sword in frustration. "I've been trying, but everything feels off."

"Alright then," he said, drawing closer to the boy's side. "Show me your footwork."

"Footwork?" Cloud cocked his head to the side.

"Yes. Did you ever receive any formal training?"

“I—yes and no, I guess. I don’t remember,” he admitted in a guarded tone. His shoulders rose as he looked away, like he was discussing something uncomfortable. “I picked things up here and there.” His eyes turned wistful for a moment. “I watched Zack. The rest I learned on my own.”

“I can see that. You move as someone bigger than yourself though, which increases your chance of injury,” he explained, hands outstretched. “Would you allow me to touch you to show you how to improve your form?”

Cloud looked up between Angeal’s hands and himself before taking a deep breath. “Sure.”

Angeal gestured with his right hand at the boy’s legs and then at his. “Bring your legs close together and bend them a bit as so. You don’t want to be too stiff when going into battle.”

Cloud copied him. As Angeal walked him through footwork and swordplay, he was surprised to see the child keep up, copying his movements quite well. He occasionally corrected Cloud’s legs and arms, but the kid had talent overall. Then again, it wouldn’t surprise him if the Science Department did some training with him. They did with Sephiroth, after all.

Despite Cloud’s movements, however, the boy could not compensate for size and gravity as the Buster Sword’s swing nearly pulled him off his feet. Angeal smoothly caught both along the way, a short laugh escaping him at the sight. Cloud glared up at him even after Angeal set him down. He tried to reach for the sword, but Angeal kept it out of reach. “So, why did you choose my sword?”

Cloud pulled his hand away, brows furrowed. “That’s yours?”

“Yes. It was a gift from my father.”

“Oh,” he muttered. Cloud shuffled in his shoes, discomfort exuding from his body. He let out a quiet “Sorry.”

“Were you planning on stealing it?”

He looked away sheepishly. “It looked like a friend of mine’s.”

“Which friend?”

Cloud’s face shut down completely. “It doesn’t matter. He’s dead now.”

And damn if that didn’t break Angeal’s heart. There was a lot about Cloud that remained a mystery, it seemed. He knew Sephiroth and Zack were working on the subject. How many other child soldiers had Professor Hojo intended to make? He shuddered at the thought. As many as Shinra intended, he supposed darkly. One thing was for sure: Angeal would keep a closer eye on the Shinra SOLDIER program from now on. Professor Hollander may have taken over Hojo’s position, but that didn’t mean the man was any better.

“Well,” he said, switching back to the matter at hand. “theft is still not very honorable.”

“Honor doesn’t matter when all you’re trying to do is survive,” the boy retorted.

Angeal shook his head. Goddess, this boy needed direction. Just as he was about to lecture the boy about the subject, a door slammed open, nearly torn off its hinges. He could not hide his shock at his friend's state of attire, silver hair pulled back in a messy wet ponytail and missing his infamous long coat.

"Cloud!" Sephiroth shouted.

The owner of said name ducked his head, body poised to run. "Fuck."

Considering there was only one door out of the room, it didn't take Sephiroth long to capture his son.

"Language," Sephiroth chided as he scooped him up. Despite Cloud's reluctance to be caught, he settled against his father's chest with a low grumble.

Angeal laughed. It never ceased to amaze him how much his friend had taken to fatherhood so quickly. "Sephiroth. You got here quickly."

Cloud turned to him with a look of betrayal. "It was you?"

"Angeal," Sephiroth said with a short nod. "Thank you for finding him. Cloud, what did I say about wandering off?"

"I said I was going out."

“I was in the shower. You could have waited,” Sephiroth said sternly, disappointment riding his voice.

“You took too long! It’s not my fault you go through a bottle of shampoo and conditioner every time you wash your stupidly long hair,” Cloud commented dryly. Angeal shook his head at the words. Zack must have introduced him to the SOLDIER fan groups and their weird ideas about them.

“Cloud.” Sephiroth gave him a look that Angeal deemed the parental glare.

Angeal inwardly shuddered beneath it. It was as if someone blended the look Sephiroth had on the battlefield in Wutai with the look his father used to give him when Angeal tried to skip school to play with Genesis.

Cloud tried to muster a brave face but ultimately lost beneath his father’s unrelenting stare, arms crossing over each other as he let out a grumbled, “Sorry.”

Sephiroth adjusted his hold so that Cloud would face him directly. “Sorry for what?”

“Sorry for running off without telling you,” he mumbled. “Next time I’ll yell louder.”

Sephiroth released a deep sigh.

Angeal shook his head at the scene, trying not to laugh. He had a feeling this wouldn’t be the last time the boy snuck out beneath his

father's nose.

It was three months before he caught the boy back in the room. Angeal silently watched. His movements were fluid, better than the last time he'd trained. Instead of the buster sword, he got one of the SOLDIER-issued short swords. It brought a small smile to the man's face. He dropped his gym bag. "Training again, I see."

"Angeal." Cloud said before freezing up, expression guarded. "Are you going to tell Sephiroth I'm here?"

"He already knows," Angeal replied. "That's why he sent me. He has some work to finish. Is that your school uniform?"

Cloud sighed. "I know, very adorable. Heard it all, moving on."

"Do you enjoy it?" He asked as he joined his side.

"Hell no," he scoffed, swiping at the air with his sword. "They're all a bunch of screaming children. I have better things to do than play hide and seek or learn my ABCs when I already know how to write."

That…was debatable, Angeal thought, but kept his mouth shut. He had seen the boy's poor writing skills firsthand from his friend. Sephiroth had mentioned Cloud was quite intelligent but lacked certain general information, like the names of fruits and vegetables

and things normal children would know about. It made sense: Hojo hadn't intended for Cloud to be a person but a weapon.

Not that he would ever let Cloud know that. Perhaps Sephiroth would find him a program that was better suited for the boy. For now, however, he would have to suffer through preschool.

Angeal hummed softly. "I heard you got suspended this week for starting a riot during a school play."

Genesis sent him the pictures. How he got them he would never know since Shinra had hushed the incident for publicity's sake. Even Sephiroth wasn't allowed to keep his photos of the event, much to the man's disappointment. Cloud made a very cute kitty-cat, according to him.

"Shinra should pay for their crimes against humanity," Cloud stated, chest puffing out. "A good friend once said nothing worth fighting for was ever won without sacrifice."

"Good words to live by." He lifted an eyebrow as he asked, "How did that end up with the auditorium on fire though?"

"That one wasn't on purpose." He shrugged, twirling the sword around like Zack. "Mostly."

"So you came to train instead. You know, there's more to fighting than just swordswork. You need dreams and honor too," he pointed out.

"Dreams are for *children* ."

Angeal stared; Cloud sighed. “Children other than me,” he amended.

“Tell me, what is your dream?”

It was Cloud’s turn to stare. Ah yes, Angeal thought wryly, the whole *patricide* thing.

“What if Sephiroth doesn’t go insane,” Angeal said. “What if someone like you kept him on the right path?”

Cloud shook his head. “How would I be able to do that?”

“Well, for starters you could stop pranking him.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Cloud said, though his heart didn’t seem to be behind the words. In fact, Angeal could almost see the vulnerability in the child’s gaze.

Angeal bent down to one knee. Cloud continued swinging his sword, although Angeal could tell his heart wasn’t in it anymore. “Sephiroth cares a lot about you. I know it’s hard; you’ve never had a parent before, but he won’t hurt you. I can promise you that. You’ve changed him more than you know.”

Cloud slowed to a stop, sword pointed to the ground. His face filtered through a multitude of emotions before settling on confusion. “How would you know?”

“Because I am his friend. I have known him since we were teens. He’s become much more open with others because of *you* ,” Angeal explained gently. “He has someone to protect now. He didn’t before, not really. You are his only family. Sephiroth didn’t have a mother or father or siblings. For the longest time, he was alone. He doesn’t want that for you.”

“You’re saying he’s lonely? Him? He can have anybody. He’s the Silver General, the top SOLDIER of Shinra.” He replied, voice growing higher, head downcast. “I'm nobody. I’m not even sure why I’m here in the first place. I’m too weak and small to do anything meaningful.”

Angeal lifted the boy’s head. “Sometimes, being at the top means that no one is willing or able to meet you there. Cloud, you are not nobody. You are someone. Don’t let anyone ever pull you down into thinking you’re lesser. I know you have a different mindset than a normal child, but we are all meaningful in our own ways.” He gently brushed the boy’s hair affectionately. “Now, what is your true dream? I don’t think you want just to kill someone.”

Cloud smiled, truly smiled. It was a sad one, but it felt more genuine than anything Angeal had ever seen from the child before. The boy’s shoulders lowered, his eyes cast off to the side. “No, you’re right. As for your question.” He paused, mulling over his words. “Give me some time. You’ve given me a lot to think about, Angeal. Thanks.”

“You’re an interesting kid, Cloud,” he said as he returned to his feet. “Just try not to antagonize Sephiroth too much.”

“Alright. I’ll lay off a bit.”

Unbeknownst to Angeal, laying off for Cloud meant turning his attention to the rest of SOLDIER.

Link to my **discord** if you wanna hang.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Kunsel is assigned a new mission.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Back with a new chapter! There are two more chapters to go for this part of the story, so stay tuned. Sequel is in progress but no idea when it will be done, especially now that Rebirth is out. I'm gonna play it when I get home from this trip I'm on. Thank you so much for all the kudos, comments and bookmarks. I sincerely appreciate them.

Cloud-watching was a national pastime in SOLDIER these past six months. Kunsel would know since he started it with a picture of Cloud trying to sneak into their breakroom. General Sephiroth personally taped a note to the door forbidding minors from partaking in caffeine for health concerns, but Cloud ignored it anyway. The kid waited for unsuspecting SOLDIERs to open the door to sneak in to get a cup of SOLDIER-issued coffee. It didn't matter that there were other coffee machines in Shinra Tower. Cloud focused on theirs, probably out of spite for the General's rule. In the end, it was funny as hell, and for a group of bored young men, Cloud soon became their newest form of entertainment. It got even better as the months passed, and Cloud turned his attacks from Sephiroth to the rest of the SOLDIER department.

Whether he was pranking SOLDIERs or bullying Turks, Cloud had become the unofficial mascot for SOLDIER. Zack even commissioned a tiny SOLDIER First hoodie as a joke that ended up being the boy's go-to outfit, much to the group's amusement. Honestly, Cloud was the gift that kept on giving.

Kunsel watched everything from afar, content to hear gossip at a distance. Even when things got slow at headquarters, something new would pop up, like the recent dissolution of the Silver Elite, Sephiroth's premier fan club, into two fractions: *The Ivory Kingdom* , a group that specifically catered towards Sephiroth-only fans, and *the Silver Fatherhood* , which included his offspring. Kunsel had a good laugh about that. The kiddo wasn't even an employee yet and had a group discussing whether Sephiroth used the same shampoo and conditioner on him to make his hair so fluffy. That wasn't Cloud's biggest fanbase, however.

No, that honor was given to Second Class Zackary Fair's new followers: The Babysitter's Club. Kunsel took great pride in Zack's dismay at being told the name, but damn did it *fit* . The moment Zack returned from a mission, he had Cloud glued to his side. It helped that Zack loved the little kid like a baby brother, bringing him local snacks and tales of his heroics. If anyone asked Kunsel who he thought was Zack's biggest fan was it would be without a doubt the boy who followed him around like a baby chocobo. It was cute. Kunsel enjoyed seeing their humorous interactions after missions.

Like with every sunny day, though, there soon came rain clouds. He recalled one recent mission with Zack that hadn't ended well. The war with Wutai was almost over, but that didn't mean mercenaries and the remaining combatants made it any easier. They'd lost two on their team who were friends of Zacks. Good dudes, too. Morale was low coming home despite their wins.

Nevertheless, their silver mascot was waiting at headquarters. Zack would normally run up to the boy and swing him around, but something in his body language must have tipped the kid off. Cloud slowly approached Zack and grabbed his hand, giving it a tight squeeze.

"Everything okay?" He asked.

“No. We lost some folks,” Zack responded somberly. Kunsel had waited around awkwardly, not sure what to say.

“You’re not alone,” Cloud reminded, petting the man’s hair.

Zack hugged the kid tightly, head resting on Cloud’s small shoulder. “I could have done better, though.”

“Or you could have done worse,” Cloud responded, patting the man on his head. “Mourn them, remember them, but don’t give up.”

Zack made a sad sound, shoulders shaking before he lifted his head. Kunsel turned his own, pretending he wasn’t watching it all like the rest of their troop.

“Aw, Cloudy, I’m the one who gives pep talks, not you,” Zack said, choking up. The words seemed to get through to the man; however, his demeanor changed back to his usual self as he gave orders for the debrief and next steps following their mission.

Cloud hadn't been the only thing that changed in SOLDIER either, now that Kunsel thought about it. The Silver General had become a common sight in Shinra HQ and even among the people in Midgard. Cloud-watching frequently coincided with Sephiroth-stalking, after all. Kunsel heard from one of his sources that the President hadn’t liked the man’s lack of missions recently until he saw the vast profits come in from Urban Development’s Reeve Tuesti on their new parent product line.

Sephiroth’s fatherhood made Shinra billions, according to one of his friends in accounting.

That was only the outside viewpoint, though. The inside scoop was much more interesting in Kunsel's humble opinion. If you thought everyone else was obsessed with Cloud, you hadn't met Sephiroth, as one poor infantryman informed him after having the gall to ask the General about his son and earning himself a two-hour monologue about all of Cloud's accomplishments. General Sephiroth had taken to parenting like a fish to water and would talk your ear off if you asked about the boy. And photos? The Babysitter's Club and the Silver Fatherhood had nothing on the General's personal collection.

All of it amused Kunsel, the information collector of SOLDIER, who probably had better things to do, like work, but where was the fun in that?

It was why he was positively terrified when Director Lazard sent him down to the General's desk to meet with him. Sweat collected at his neck as he walked through the hallway, his helmet hot and itchy as he turned the corner. Did he find out about Kunsel's underground betting ring? Was he going to be fired? No, the Director would have done it himself if that was the case. Were they sending him on a mission to Wutai or someplace worse? Kunsel stood outside the door, uncertain of how to enter. Should he knock or just walk in or—

"Can you please move?" A deep voice asked from behind.

A shadow loomed over him. Kunsel turned his head. For a Second Class SOLDIER like Kunsel, the fact that he hadn't even heard the man sneak up from behind was a testament to the difference between a First and Second. Two sets of catlike eyes stared down at him. He felt like a rabbit cornered by predator and its young. He resisted the urge to gulp. Military training kicked in as he stepped aside, back ramrod straight as he followed them into the room. The General placed his son on the ground before turning his attention back to him.

"I take it you are Second Class Kunsel."

He nodded, arms at the ready. “Yes sir, General. You asked for me?”

“Indeed,” he replied, sliding into his chair. “ I have an urgent matter to attend to and I need someone to…” He glanced over at the boy as though he were mulling over his word choice. “ *oversee* Cloud for the day. I know this is not the most exciting mission, but Director Lazard and I will compensate you well.”

Kunsel blinked. This was not what he was expecting, like, at all. He couldn’t help but ask, “What about Zack?”

“He’s out on a mission in Costa Del Sol,” The General mentioned, still staring him down. “He was the one who recommended you.”

“You didn’t ask your other friends–er, the Commanders?” Kunsel wasn’t exactly babysitting material. Sure, they were cute and all, but from a *distance* . He threw a weary glance at the child .He had seen how Cloud handled other SOLDIERs who got on his bad side.

“Friends…yes, I would have, but Angeal and Genesis are in Medical today with Professor Hollander.” His gaze sharpened. “I’d ask that everything we speak about here remains here, like your gambling ring.”

Shit. Kunsel prayed the world would swallow him whole right now. When it didn’t, he moved to the next best thing: ass-kissing. “Understood, sir. I would be happy to assist! Anything I should know for the assignment before I get started?”

“I’ll text you the specifics, but for the most part just keep an eye on him. He’s been on good behavior this week, haven’t you, Cloud?”

General Sephiroth said, running a hand through his son's hair.

Cloud rolled his eyes, swatting at the hand like an annoyed cat.

"Don't cause any trouble, Cloud." The General set his eyes on Kunsel. "Take care of him. He knows the rules, but he'll try to bend them where he can."

Kunsel saluted the man. "I will do my best to protect him, sir."

At first, Cloud simply walked around the Shinra building, Kunsel following dutifully behind. It was quiet, almost relaxing, to simply observe the other departments, who seemed almost comfortable with Cloud's presence, presenting him with small candies and snacks, which he graciously accepted.

The peace lasted all of an hour before he lost sight of the damn kid.

Kunsel, however, was not without the tools to find people. His information network wasn't nearly as advanced as Shinra's of course, but it had its uses. He called up one of his Turk friends to track the boy down. Camera footage showed him leaving the Shinra Tower for the metro, taking the route to the 5th Plate. Kunsel followed close behind as his friend updated him on the boy's whereabouts. It seemed Cloud-Watching was not simply a hobby of SOLDIER but of the Turks as well, he thought dryly.

“What the fuck,” he whispered to himself as he took in the scenery.

Kunsel never expected he would be following the kid into the Sector 5 Slums. The place was surprisingly greener than topside, the grays and browns of old decaying shacks and storefronts softened by the inclusion of grasses and even flowers in some areas. The locals were cautious but willing to communicate for a bit of coin, especially about a certain silver-haired boy Kunsel was looking for right now. It led him down Petal Lane from the Center District of the slums, aptly named for its abundance of flowers. Much to his surprise, he encountered two Turks halfway down the small road. Awkward didn’t even begin to describe the feeling in Kunsel’s gut. They nodded at each other, the taller of the two Turks tilting his sunglasses to get a better look at him while the red-haired one simply smirked.

“Cloud-duty?” The two men asked in sync.

“Cloud-duty,” Kunsel admitted with an added sigh.

The red one barked a laugh.

The conversation ended, leaving Kunsel with more questions than answers as he entered what appeared to be a garden. Cloud was easy enough to find amongst the greenery with his silver hair. Kunsel silently watched as his charge ran through the lilies, nearly barrelling into a young lady who was tending to one of the nearby bushes.

She startled at the sudden hug but recovered quickly, patting at Cloud’s locks with a surprised but warm smile. Her outfit was simple in comparison to her appearance, with a pretty face and long brown hair pulled back into a loose braid. Kunsel was glad Zack wasn’t here because he was pretty sure the guy would be hitting on her right about now.

“Aerith!” Kunsel might not see Cloud’s face from this distance, but he could hear the anguish in the child’s voice.

“Why hello,” she said, continuing to brush the boy’s hair with her fingers. “Do I know you?”

Ouff. Poor kid. Kunsel could almost hear the boy’s heart being destroyed. Cloud ducked his head down. “I…No, I guess you don’t know me. I thought you would.”

Damn, did the kid just get rejected by his first crush? Kunsel wished he could get closer but something told him to keep his distance. As Cloud began to move back the girl grasped his arm to pull him closer.

“Oh! You’re the person the planet was telling me about,” she exclaimed, putting her basket down. “Aw, come here, silly. You look like you could use a hug. You must have been through a lot.”

Kunsel didn’t know what she meant by planet but Cloud’s face showed that he did. She captured Cloud in her arms before he could move away. The boy seemed to crumple, his tough exterior cracking like an egg. Cloud’s shoulders shook beneath the young woman’s hug. Even though he didn’t make a sound, Kunsel could tell the poor kid was crying. It was the first time he’d ever seen the boy so vulnerable. Cloud had been such a little force of nature on the SOLDIER floor that he had forgotten how much of a kid he was beneath it all.

“It’s not fair,” Cloud said angrily, voice breaking.

Aerith nodded, wiping away his tears. “I know.”

“Why me? What did I ever do to deserve this?” His legs crumpled beneath him. Aerith caught him before he reached the ground, holding him close to her like a mother would a hurt child. “It wasn’t great but it was stable. I was stable.”

“I know.”

“I wanna go back. I don’t have any of you and I couldn’t be more alone. It’s scary and all these new feelings and this body are too much. Everything is too much, Aerith,” he said hysterically, grabbing his head. “I’m still me but not me because I have thoughts and feelings that are so much younger and I don’t like it. It’s like I’m losing myself all over again and it’s all because of *him* .” He hiccuped, breathing in and out in rapid succession. “And I can’t hate this him because he’s not him yet. This him cares and is nice to me and everything is changing but there are some things that are the same like the red asshole has Geostigma or something similar! He’s gonna die if I don’t do anything about it. Fuck, everything is happening all over again but the freaking planet made me too tiny to do anything about it and—”

“Cloud,” Aerith interrupted. “Listen to my voice. Can you hear me?”

The boy took in several breaths before he replied shakily, “Y-yeah.”

She reached into her pocket, pulling out a small treat. “You see this candy?”

He nodded.

“I want you to look at it. Feel it in your hands.” She placed it in his palm. “How does it feel? Describe it to me.”

“It feels…Squishy. A little sticky. The surface is smooth,” he said, harsh breathing slowing down as he spoke.

Kunsel’s eyes widened as realization dawned.

“I got it from one of the restaurants nearby,” she said. “It’s a new candy. They call them Gummy-Summys. Each one is shaped like a different summon.” She plucked it from his hand and held it aloft. “What summon is this one?”

“It’s…It’s got horns, right? Ifrit?”

“Bingo!” She exclaimed, placing it back into his hand and lifting the hand to his mouth. “Now take a bite! What does it taste like?”

Cloud ate the candy then squirmed around, face scrunching up. “Ugh. It’s sour.”

“Wait a minute, the taste will change.”

He did as she said (a miracle in Kunsel’s opinion), his head turning upward. “Oh…Oh! Now it’s sweet. There’s something jumping around on my tongue too as it dissolves. This would have been a hit in Edge with the kids!” He snorted softly. “It’s like biting into a dumbapple but so much sweeter.”

“You’re right!” She laughed, placing her hands together. “Now, how do you feel now?”

The boy paused, mulling over his words. “I…different. I’m not as scared.”

“You looked like you were having a panic attack, so I walked you through what my mom used to do with me,” she explained, brushing his bangs back. “Cloud, I can’t imagine the pain and suffering you’ve gone through. If I could, I would set everything back to its right place, but I don’t have that much power.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, kicking at the dirt. “I figured I would still ask.”

“Sometimes, the Planet hands us problems that may not have a clear answer. It doesn’t think the way we do. You said you don’t have any of us, but you already have me as much as you want,” she explained, pinching his cheek affectionately. “I may not remember you like you do me, Cloud, but I do know I already love you and I bet, once you meet the others, they’ll love you just as much as I do too. As they say, the mind might forget but the heart remembers!”

“You really think,” he started before pausing. He shook his head. “I don’t deserve it. After everything I’ve done–”

“Nonsense! Now who's the one that’s forgotten, hm?” She grasped underneath his shoulders and whirled around.

“Aerith!” He laughed, wiggling in her arms. “Put me down!”

She slowly brought him back to the ground, flicking him on the nose for good measure. “You deserve it and so much more! You might not have the same relationships with us like before, but that doesn’t mean you can’t meet them again and start new ones!” She smiled gently,

placing a soft kiss to his forehead that made the boy turn cherry red. “Cloud, you are loved. Time and space are not going to change what is already in our hearts so long as the Lifestream exists.”

“But what if I screw up? What if I fail again?” He crossed his arms, bending down to the grass.

Aerith joined him on the ground. “That’s what friends are for, Cloud. Even when you fall, we will be there to catch you, and yes, even Sephiroth.”

A soft silence passed between them, the only sounds coming from the water and distant city humm overhead. It was hard to believe such a place existed, Kunsel thought.

After a few minutes of quiet, Cloud snorted. “You know, the craziest thing about this is that Sephiroth is technically my dad now.”

“Is he a good one?” Aerith asked with a lifted brow.

Cloud shrugged. “I’ve never had a dad before, so I don’t know. My previous one died a long time ago.” He leaned against her shoulder. “It makes me miss mom, even if I can’t remember everything about her.”

“I know how you feel,” Aerith said wistfully.

If they said anything else, Kunsel didn’t catch it. He was already walking away to the entrance of the road. This was too much. He wasn’t sure how to feel or think about what he just witnessed but the invasion of their privacy had eaten up any of his remaining desire to

eavesdrop. It was a waterfall of information to process, and Kunsel wasn't sure if he even wanted to? Maybe, just maybe, some things should be left unspoken, even for a gossip king like himself.

The sun had descended below the plates when Cloud moseyed on past him. Kunsel rose to his feet, following the kid a few steps behind. Cloud tilted his head, casting a sideye. In the shadows of the late afternoon, the glow of his eyes and slit pupils gave him an eerie appearance.

"How long were you listening?" Cloud asked.

Kunsel scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "For most of it. Didn't understand much of it, but I'm not gonna tattle on you if that's what you're worried about."

They walked in silence through the Center District until Cloud replied, "Thanks."

"No problem, kid." Something shimmery glinted in the kid's hand as he placed it into his pocket. "What's that?"

"This? Just some water from Aerith." He gives Kunsel an innocent look, complete with a fake smile and big puppy-dog eyes. "Hey, do you remember when the SOLDIER commencement ceremony is?"

Kunsel pursed his lips. He knew he shouldn’t tell Cloud. His entire subconscious was screaming at him that it was a bad idea.

Still, watching the Commanders turned Generals get buckets of water dunked on them during the televised broadcast was immensely amusing. Kunsel kept a straight face throughout, despite General Rhapsodos’ cursing and General Hewley attempts at dragging him off.

Check out my discord (links in other chapters because I'm too lazy to copy it to this one today).

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Roche has a new co-driver.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Thank so much for all the amazing kudos, bookmarks and comments. I'm sorry if I haven't been able to reply on all of them. Currently dealing with Covid which is a bummer. Thankfully all the writing is done so I don't have to think much lol. Hope you enjoy the chapter! Shoutout to fruitloopchan for doing such an amazing job on the comic commish.

The scents of gasoline and mako were heavy in the parking garage of Shinra Tower. Just the way Roche liked it, in all honesty. The rest of Shinra smelled too clean and pristine for a slum rat like him, who preferred the outstretched highways and tunnels of Midgar. Home was where the heart was, as they say, and Roche's home was on the road. When he joined, he was older than most recruits, settling into Third Class SOLDIER like a well-worn leather glove. Sure, he didn't get to have as much fun as others like Zackary Fair, the rising star of SOLDIER, but he sure as hell enjoyed lazing around in Midgar versus the hellscape that was Wutai in its dying throes as Shinra sang its fangs into them like a Midgar Zolom. He'd seen some of the SOLDIERs coming back from the fighting, and, suffice to say, he much preferred the motor-division. Not as much moving up, but hey, it beat getting PTSD like the others.

Well, *as* much PTSD.

He didn't recall Shinra-issued bikes coming with preschooler attachments, though, especially one he modified himself. Oh man, the

Gods must be laughing at him right now. The child sat in his seat, testing out Roche's handlebars and examining his headlights even though his feet couldn't reach the pedal.

Roche laughed at the sight, gaining the kid's attention. His cat-like eyes slit into slivers. Roche would have been intimated if it had come from the kid's dad, but on him? It was like a kitten. Silver hair, SOLDIER hoodie, and a permanent scowl like someone pissed in his cereal this morning—Roche would have to be blind not to recognize *the* Cloud , SOLDIER's unofficial mascot.

"So, you like bikes too, little guy?" Roche asked as he approached his ride.

"Not a little guy," Cloud replied coolly. "My name is Cloud."

"Oh, we all know who *you* are," Roche drawled, burying his hand into the kid's hair. Oh wow, it really was as fluffy as they said. Cloud slapped the hand away, making Roche chuckle. He bowed his head. "You can call me Roche, Third Class Rider Extraordinaire. You gonna get off my bike?"

Cloud leaned back in the seat, one brow lifted. "Doesn't have your name on it."

Roche could have done several things better in this situation. He could have called the Director to let him know Cloud was sneaking around here, thereby solving the problem. He could have dragged the boy up to the SOLDIER floor and sat him right in front of the General's office if he wanted to be a little harsher. But alas, Roche was never one for reasonable choices.

He swung a leg over the seat, startling the kid. "You're a cheeky

spitfire, ain't cha? Guess you're gonna ride with me then." He winked. "Welcome aboard, my little co-driver. Hold on tight, yeah?"

Okay. So…if he was honest, Roche hadn't expected the kid to stay on the seat when the engine started. Most preschoolers get spooked, yeah? It was about midway through the underground going westbound towards Sector 6 that it hit him that maybe this hadn't been the best idea.

"How ya hanging back there, partner?"

Tiny claws dug into his back as they rounded a sharp corner. Huh, maybe he should have put the kid in front and not behind, Roche thought. The General would probably murder him if his kid ended up pancaked on the road. He quickly grabbed the boy's jacket with his left arm whilst steering with his right and pulled him around. It wasn't the safest maneuver, but Cloud landed in his lap with a soft thud and a loud curse.

"You're insane," Cloud yelled over the honking cars.

Roche grinned. "And yet you're still riding with me."

"Only because I don't want to die if I get off," the boy retorted. It was kinda weird to hear a preschooler talk in such an adult-like way but somehow, it fit the little sourpuss.

"Destiny has brought us together, Cloud. Who are we to ignore the engine's roar?" He exclaimed, revving his engine.

Cloud didn't seem to share that opinion. "Destiny can go screw itself!"

“So harsh! Destiny is the road we all travel on, little friend.”

He shot him a glare. “Do you ever get tired of talking like that?”

Roche could almost hear his drill instructors lecturing him on his tone of speech in the back of his head, then he immediately stuffed the memory back with the rest of the things he didn’t care about. Judgment was a constant in Roche’s life and he wasn’t about to let another’s get him down. He swerved across three lanes, enjoying the wind hitting his face. “You ever learn let people be who they are? I am who I am. I love bikes and I love fighting. There’s no greater thing for me in this life than chasing the next exhilarating adventure.” He looked down at the kid. “What about you?”

“Me?” Cloud’s brows furrowed together.

“What are you chasing?”

He could almost hear the little guy think about his question.

“Before? Vengeance,” he answered after a minute. “Now? Maybe a chance at something new, but I can’t figure out what I want that to be yet.”

“Valid,” he said. “Well, you got a lot of time to figure that out.”

“Not really! I still have to save—Wait, where are we going?” He asked as he noticed their exit.

Roche smirked as they took a narrow exit, jumping a few barriers along the way. “Wall-Market. I gotta track down a little thief. Stole one of our new Hardy-Daytonas.”

Cloud’s eyes sharpened. “The one with the chrome handlebars and third wheel in the back?”

“The very same.” Roche shot a curious look. “You know bikes?”

The kid smirked.

It turned out that his little passenger was just as much a motorcycle enthusiast as he was. He even recommended some great add-ons for Roche’s bike. If the kid hadn’t already had a dad, he’s pretty sure he would have adopted him on the spot.

Sadly, as much as he would have loved for their adventure to continue on through the roads of eternity, their story would have to come to a close tonight. The mission had been a bust with the flaming building they left behind. The explosions were super brutal too. If this were a dining experience, he would have given it a ten out of ten for the amount of fuckery they got up to, and it was all thanks to his little riding buddy.

It was no wonder Zack Fair had risen to the top so quickly. Managing Cloud was a job in itself and boy, had Roche bitten off more than he

could chew. Not that he would ever admit it. He was having way too much fun. Cloud didn't even have to do anything either. Kid attracted chaos, a beacon to trouble even though he wasn't trying to cause any.

Roche respected that. Hell, he reveled in it. Shit like this made life more exciting after all.

He couldn't help but look back a third time at the flames flickering in the distance. His veins throbbed with excitement as if a doctor had just shot him up with a new dose of Mako. Roche whistled. "You, my little dance partner, are the one who is truly insane. I bow to your brilliance."

Cloud hit him in the back, ears red as the flames. "Oh, just shut up."

"I didn't even know people could use Fire Materia that way," he said excitedly. Man, he really should have taken notes or something.

"Goddess strike me down. Please."

"Don't be too hard on yourself. I mean, Shinra isn't going to be happy that we lost the Daytona," he mentioned offhandedly before shrugging. "But it's no big deal. The ride was worth it."

"That bike is the least of your problems. We killed Don Corneo! I've screwed up the timeline even more!" He cried out, grabbing his hair.

Aw, baby's first crisis, Roche thought.

“All’s fair in love and war, my friend.”

“Maybe you’re right, and I’m insane. Why did I even go with you?” he sighed, his head hanging.

“Destiny—”

“Can shove it,” Cloud finished petulantly.

Roche closed his mouth with a sharp click. He looked side to side for any incoming traffic before looking back at his new favorite buddy. “Did you have fun though?”

Cloud groaned, dragging a hand down his face before answering in a begrudging tone, “Yes.”

“Wasn’t it cool to watch the fireworks afterward?” He egged on.

“Yes.”

“And didn’t we figure out who stole the bike to sell on the black market?” Sure, the dude and part of Wall Market were blown to pieces, but the mission was successful. Well, successful in Roche’s definition of the word at least. Maybe not Shinra’s.

“Yeah, and now he’s burnt to a crisp, although knowing my luck, he might have just escaped through some stupid underground passageway.” He sighed again, staring ahead. “At least no more women will be sacrificed as brides to the Don.”

“Exactly! I’m glad you’re looking on the bright side now!” He exclaimed. Couldn’t have his little co-driver depressed after all. The kid seemed to do an awful lot of mopping around anyway.

Cloud rested his head back against Roche’s chest. Roche couldn’t look all the way down but was pretty sure the kid had a smile on his face. “Yeah. Maybe I should look more on the bright side of things.”

“That’s the spirit!” he said before he caught sight of the road ahead—or rather, its forced end. "Alas, I think our adventure is about to take a sharp turn.”

“Why’s that—Oh shit.”

Oh shit was right. Several Shinra-issued vehicles blocked the tunnel with infantry scouting the perimeter as a chopper circled overhead. It wouldn’t have been so terrifying if Sephiroth himself wasn’t standing in the middle of the lane with Masamune in hand, staring Roche down like he had—Roche looked behind him. Ah, yeah, maybe taking the kid out on a mission without parental approval had been a bad idea. In Roche’s defense, Cloud willingly joined him. In a sense.

Yeah, he was screwed, wasn’t he?

Roche slowed to a stop a few meters ahead of the man. “Good Evening, General! Have you come to join us on these Midgardian Highways?”

The General stared unblinking at the two. It sent a shiver down Roche’s spine. Even Cloud was frozen in place by the man’s presence. They didn’t call him the Silver Demon during the war for nothing after

all.

The terse silence was only broken by the General's soft footsteps toward them. Roche's smile had long since disappeared, leaving behind a terrified grimace in its place.

"Give me one reason I shouldn't have you court-martialed or worse," he stated, voice as frosty as his expression.

Roche thanked every single deity he could think of as Cloud answered before him.

"Dad, pick me up."

The words were like a spell, breaking the General's monopoly on the mood. Roche watched the man's anger disappear within moments after the sentence left Cloud's mouth, replaced by a blank expression. Seconds passed.

"Cloud?" The General asked.

The kid let out a deep breath, eyes lifting to meet the man along with his arms. "Dad," he insisted. "Let's go."

Roche had to give it to Cloud. The General reached down to the awaiting arms and scooped the boy up from Roche's bike, though not without throwing the driver a harsh glare "I will deal with you later."

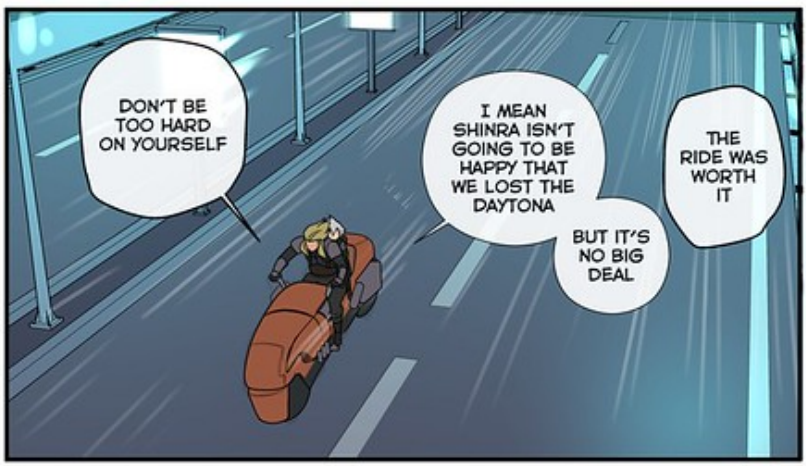
It seemed that death would not come for Roche today. For now, the

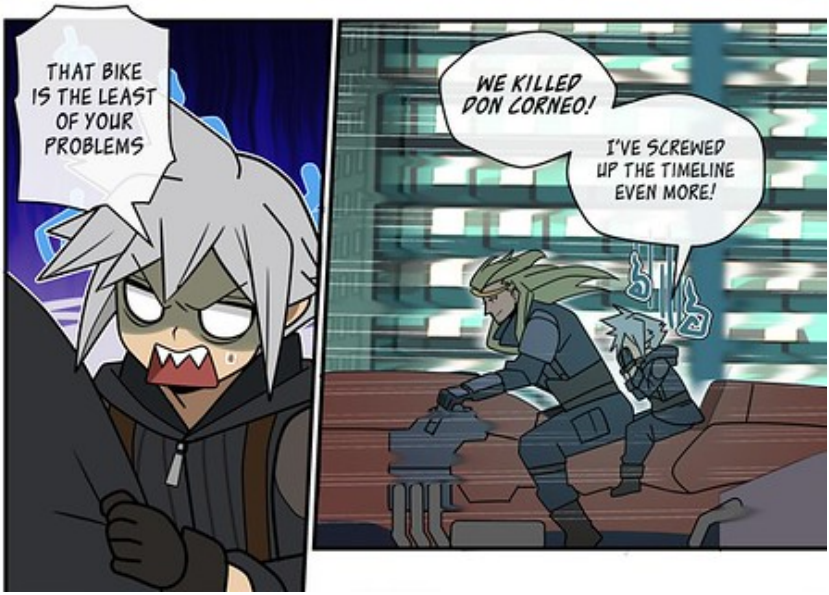
Speed Demon would ride another day. He couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief, shoulders slumping forward at the narrow escape from becoming Masamune's next victim. From behind the Silver General, he saw Cloud throw him a thumbs-up. Roche returned the gesture.

Badass.

Comic by the Amazing Fruitloopchan

I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW PEOPLE COULD USE FIRE MATERIA THAT WAY
GODDESS STRIKE ME DOWN, PLEASE.


DON'T BE TOO HARD ON YOURSELF
I MEAN SHINRA ISN'T GOING TO BE HAPPY THAT WE LOST THE DAYTONA
BUT IT'S NO BIG DEAL
THE RIDE WAS WORTH IT


THAT BIKE IS THE LEAST OF YOUR PROBLEMS
WE KILLED DON CORNEO!
I'VE SCREWED UP THE TIMELINE EVEN MORE!

ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR, MY FRIEND
MAYBE YOU'RE RIGHT AND I'M INSANE
WHY DID I EVEN GO WITH YOU?
DESTINY—
CAN SHOVE IT
DID YOU HAVE FUN THOUGH?
GROAN
YES
WASN'T IT COOL TO WATCH THE FIREWORKS AFTERWARD?
YES
AND DIDN'T WE FIGURE OUT WHO STOLE THE BIKE TO SELL ON THE BLACK MARKET?
YEAH, AND NOW HE'S BURNT TO A CRISP, ALTHOUGH KNOWING MY LUCK HE MIGHT HAVE JUST ESCAPED THROUGH SOME STUPID UNDERGROUND PASSAGEWAY
AT LEAST NO MORE WOMEN WILL BE SACRIFICED AS BRIDES TO THE DON
EXACTLY! I'M GLAD YOU'RE LOOKING ON THE BRIGHT SIDE NOW!
YEAH, MAYBE I SHOULD LOOK MORE ON THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THINGS
THAT'S THE SPIRIT!
ALAS, I THINK OUR ADVENTURE IS ABOUT TO TAKE A SHARP TURN
WHY'S THAT—
PEEK
OH SHIT!

GOOD EVENING, GENERAL!
HAVE YOU COME TO JOIN US ON THESE MIDGARDIAN HIGHWAYS?
Cloud
LV 5
HP 100/100
MP 999/999
Enemy-Skill
MPneeded
002
Causes [Stun/Confusion] on opponents. Dignity be damn.
Annoy Genesis
Recite Loveless
Honor Lecture
Squat Supreme
Prank
Play Dead
Gambler's Luck
Cuteness
GIVE ME ONE REASON I SHOULDN'T HAVE YOU COURT MARTIALED OR WORSE
CLOUD?
DAD
PICK ME UP
DAD, LET'S GO
I WILL DEAL WITH YOU LATER

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Sephiroth tries his best to be the father he never had.

Chapter Notes

Hey, I'm back with the last chapter for this part of the story. Thank you so much for all the lovely reviews, bookmarks, and kudos. I'll try to answer more comments soon. I've been really sick but am slowly recovering. Sequel fic is in progress, and more information will be included on my Discord. Don't expect it for a while, though. I want to finish most of it before I start posting, and it will be much longer than this one.

Lightning flashed through the sky, bringing a torrent of rare rain that drenched the city of Midgar from the top of Shinra Tower to the Sectors Slums. It dampened the green skyline into a dull gray. The subsequent thunder was softened by the helicopter's wings and shouting military officers as Sephiroth's team arrived back, weary but relieved. Gongaga might have been a small backwater village; however, its jungle was immense. It didn't help matters that the monster infestation was worse than previously believed and even harder to clean up. The job would have normally been suited for infantry, but an alleged sighting of Wutai terrorists near the broken reactor meant one of the three Generals would have to show up, and Sephiroth had drawn the short stick as it were.

Not that he minded all that much. It certainly beat being put back on the ground in Wutai like Genesis was lately, finishing off whatever remained as the war finally drew to a close. Sephiroth had been relieved when Shinra appointed his friends to higher roles in SOLDIER. They deserved it, especially after the recent bout of illness

they went through. Genesis was quite cocky about it, flaunting his new status until he realized how much more paperwork he would have to handle. Angeal remained the same as ever. Not that Sephiroth expected him to change. But that was wrong, wasn't it? Several things had changed more over the last eight months than they had for the last eight years.

For one, he had someone waiting for him back home now, he thought, lips tilting slightly upwards. Sephiroth quickly disembarked from the helicopter once the injured were transported off, heading to the elevators at breakneck speed. The Director of SOLDIER didn't even bat an eye as he came to debrief the others. People were used to him leaving for home as fast as he could now. No more required visits to the Science Department, no more unnecessary debriefs—now, when he left work, work stayed there instead of following him home.

At least for now. He never knew when Shinra could decide otherwise and put him back on full duty. His new role as a father had garnered enough good publicity for Shinra that they had eased up on their control, if only just. Still, he would take it.

His apartment wasn't in Shinra Tower, but it was close enough for him to briskly walk there. The Sector was mostly residential apartments for Shinra personnel and their families. Most days he didn't take this direction on account of *them* . Alas, he miscalculated as he spotted their group in the corner of his eye. His shoulders instinctively sagged as he realized he was too close to them to escape.

"There he is, ladies!"

He tried not to shudder as the old women surrounded him. He was used to reporters and fans but pushy grandmothers and aunties were a new one he had yet to escape so easily. They peered up at him from bespectacled faces framed by what were once fashionable hairdos.

“General! How good to see you. Oh, you look a right mess today,” the meanest of them remarked. Her voice reminded him of Scarlet, prepackaged compliments wrapped in thinly veiled insults. He wasn’t sure if it was simply due to her personality or that she was an old bitter hag with nothing else better to do—probably both.

“How fortunate you can still *see* in all your years,” he replied with the same amount of sweet venom.

Her paper-thin lips pulled downward into a scowl, her fellow ladies giggling like hyenas.

“Here! Take this for your little boy,” the eldest woman insisted, handing him a bag of vegetables.

She, at least, was nice. The others simply made chitter-chatter that hurt his ears. It was the kind of cloying sweetness that confused him to no end.

“Cloud is such an adorable child! He helped me find my Princess Softypaws last week,” one gushed.

“Indeed. What a well-mannered child. I want a grandchild like him one day,” even the mean one cooed as the others compared their own experiences with his son.

“He’s so precious,” the eldest woman remarked, patting him on his arm. “You’ve got a good boy there, General.”

A tiny hellion in Sephiroth’s opinion. Still, it did warm his heart to hear of his son’s reputation in the neighborhood. Sephiroth hadn’t

really interacted with the community where he lived previously, preferring seclusion in the SOLDIER-issued apartment complex and only coming out for work. Cloud's arrival had thrown that lifestyle out the window, however.

Running errands, rescuing cats, fixing bikes—Cloud had woven himself into the community whilst pulling Sephiroth with him. More than once Sephiroth had set off to find his missing son only to be unintentionally dragged into Cloud's newest job, like painting a fence for an elderly couple or clearing out a wererat infestation. It was… strangely fun. After the shock had worn off, people treated him like a fellow neighbor, asking about his son and the like instead of clamoring for a photo or war stories.

"Ladies, I'm afraid I can't stay and chat. I just got back from a work trip," he said, inching his way out of the group for an escape. Thankfully, they parted, though not without hanging more bags of food on his arms. At least he wouldn't have to go grocery shopping this weekend, he thought wryly. He politely said his goodbyes before leaving through an alleyway and onto his normal route back. No one else bothered him, thankfully. As the rain began to pick up once more, he hurried up the staircase to his apartment. He hadn't even gotten his key through the door before it was forced open by the home's other occupant.

Warmth filled his chest as he looked down. Cloud was dressed in a dark top and pants, the hoodie he got from Zack tied around his waist as he looked up at the man from the hallway, nose scrunching in disgust. "You look like shit."

Sephiroth arched a single brow. "Thank you, Cloud. Truly, I hadn't noticed."

The boy blinked, catlike eyes rolling at his words. His hand instinctively reached for his son's hair. It was as if the day's troubles washed away from a single touch.

Cloud stepped aside, allowing him to continue his path toward the bathroom. The house smelled faintly of Angeal's leftovers, reminding him to text the man a thank you for watching his progeny before stepping into sweet hot bliss.

The lack of working showers, constant rain, mud, and sticky monster residue had left their mark on Sephiorth's appearance. He'd been through worse in his lifetime, but he had grown accustomed to the delights of a hot shower. It took him an hour before he felt clean enough to step outside. In the meantime, his son had cleaned up his muddy footprints and thrown his clothes into the washer, a task which was greatly appreciated. It surprised him how self-sufficient the boy was until he somberly remembered that he was similar at that age. Nevertheless, despite what he told the boy, Cloud was adamant about helping out where he could.

Cloud lifted his head as Sephiroth sat beside him. He used to flinch whenever Sephiroth came this close. Now, he simply scooted to give him some room, sometimes even leaning against him like he was now. Sephiroth lifted his hand to brush the boy's bangs back before taking out a brush to start his own. The knots would take a while.

"Let me help," Cloud said out of the blue.

Sephiroth looked down, his head tilting to the side, as he considered the boy's words. "It's not necessary."

"No, but it will make it faster, right? Besides, I know how to brush long hair," he replied. "If you don't want me to—"

"Here," he said, placing his current brush in the boy's hand as he went to grab another, trying not to show his excitement. His most recent

read, ‘Psychology of a Child’ mentioned hair-care as important in familial bonding technique and Sephiroth was not going to let the opportunity pass him by.

Once he returned to his seat, Cloud dutifully worked on his left side, sectioning off the hair and slowly making his way through the locks. Sephiroth softly hummed, enjoying the sensation. No one had ever done his hair before.

“Your hair is so soft,” Cloud mumbled softly, looking surprised. When I was younger, I used to want to touch it.”

Sephiroth chuckled in response, lips turning softly upward. Eight months ago, he would have flinched away from such bonding. Now, he craved it, enjoying these precious quiet moments with his son more than anything else. Was this why so many people became parents? Sephiroth wondered whether his mother would have let him brush her hair the way his son did with his.

The thought brought up a deep-seated sigh from his lips. After discovering Cloud, he found himself more interested in his own family history. Unfortunately, the professor's death made that subject a continued mystery, much to his disappointment. He suspected Hollander’s refusal of his request had less to do with the man’s arrogance and more to do with the fact that most things in Hojo’s lab had been destroyed, including Sephiroth’s parentage.

Could he perhaps find something from Professor Gast, then? His brows furrowed. Hojo had destroyed most of the man’s research but perhaps there was still some somewhere in this world. If only he knew where to look. Sephiroth shook his head, dispersing the thoughts lest he become absorbed in them like in the past. It wouldn’t do for him to get obsessive about this now, not when he had other responsibilities.

“So, how did you end up with all this stuff in your hair?” Cloud said as he loosened another knot.

“Gongaga has a lot of jungle. Jungles have a lot of mud,” he explained.

Cloud snorted. “Ah. My sympathies.”

Once they’d finished the last knot, Sephiroth loosely braided the hair over his shoulder. His son quietly watched on, a soft yawn escaping his lips. Sephiroth checked the time. It would be a later dinner than normal but still within the confines of bedtime. Cloud, despite his insistence in being adult-like, still needed a good sleep schedule. Not that Sephiroth hadn’t benefited from his new sleeping habits either.

“Let’s get dinner started. I trust your day with Angeal was alright?” He quickly got up off the couch and started a simple dinner with Angeal’s leftovers and the vegetables from the neighborhood ladies. Cloud followed behind, pulling up a chair to assist.

Cloud made an affirmative grunt. Sephiroth nodded in response. Unlike Zack, Angeal was much stricter in dealing with Cloud, who seemed to invite chaos wherever he went.

“You brush well. Did you used to have long hair?” Sephiroth asked as he cut the vegetables into thin pieces.

“No, my friend did, though. She was special to me. We took care of each other. She’s…” He looked down at the floor, his expression falling. "She's gone now."

“I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?” He always asked even when he knew the boy’s answer.

Cloud stayed silent, expression overshadowed with grief. At the beginning of their cohabitation, he would get angry at Sephiroth for even asking (losing knife privileges for a month after one particularly bad night), but now he was subdued, reflecting internally rather than externally. At least, that was how Sephiroth interpreted it. While he wasn't a man of science, he had been religiously studying any texts regarding childcare and psychology in an attempt to glean as much information as possible to care for his son since he refused therapy of any kind. Sephiroth couldn’t blame him. Neither trusted doctors very much after their experiences in the lab.

He patted Cloud's head.

“Understood. I won’t prod then,” Sephiroth said as he resumed cutting. “I know the past is painful for you. If you want to speak to someone about it other than myself, then just say the word.”

Cloud nodded curtly, bottom lip tucked underneath his teeth. As he stirred the saucepan, he answered, “It’s not you. I’m not ready to tell anyone. Bringing it up hurts.”

“Ah, I see. I’ve been there,” he replied as he reached over his son’s head to grab some spices, tossing a dash of Banoran salt into the pan along with the cut vegetables.

“You have?” Cloud raised his head in surprise.

“I don’t like to talk about my past either. Growing up in the lab was difficult. I try not to think about the training and medical evaluations I went through under Professor Hojo’s supervision. And then what I

did in Wutai…I still have nightmares sometimes. Nightmares I won't tell anyone, not even you," he confessed.

"Me too," Cloud said after a spell. "Nightmares, I mean."

Sephiroth gently took the pan from the boy, stirring the sauce onto the vegetables until he was satisfied. "I don't have them as much as I used to, though."

"Why's that?"

Feeling oddly sentimental, he poked the boy's forehead playfully like he'd seen one of the mothers do at the nearby playgrounds. "You."

Cloud balked, his expression the very picture of a baby chocobo which earned a soft laugh from Sephiroth. When the microwave dinged, he began to set their table. Genesis had insisted he get a proper one not so long ago instead of the small ones by the television. Something about good eating habits and family bonding? Once the food was set they settled down to eat their mixture of leftovers and vegetables. It was by no means a feast, but after a week of MREs, it was quite delectable. Sephiroth basked in the quiet eating after the hot shower, finally feeling settled from the long week away.

Cloud coughed, gaining his attention. He shuffled around, brows tightly pulled together as he asked, "What you said before about nightmares? What do you mean when you said 'you'?"

Sephiroth paused, mulling over his response.

"Well, since you came into my life, my nightmares have lessened. I

sleep better here with you then I do on overnight missions as well. I think my caring for you has taken precedence over my trauma," he explained in a matter-of-fact manner.

Silver clattered on the plate. Sephiroth slowly placed his own down as he tried to read the boy's body language.

"You care about me?" Cloud said, almost accusatory in tone.

Sephiroth was by no means an expert on human interactions. Growing up in a lab with Professor Hojo as his guardian left him sorely missing in the compassion department, something his enemies and many of his men had commented on. Even Angeal and Genesis, his friends, had more than once corrected him on something he'd say (or made fun of him for it as the latter liked to do), which is why he tended toward formality in most conversations. But he knew discomfort. He knew confused. They were emotions he grew up with after all. And Cloud was emitting both right now.

He felt it at almost a cellular level. Adrenaline pulsed through his body, reacting to the boy's distress. He wondered if all parents felt this with their children, the so-called 'parental bond' spoken about in the papers he read. Or maybe it was merely something he and Cloud simply shared, creatures born of Hojo's creation. Sephiroth got on one knee, careful not to loom over the child. He knew Cloud didn't like that. He hadn't either when he was that age.

Carefully, he reached out to touch the boy's arm, gently rubbing it. "Yes, of course I care. You matter to me, Cloud, more than you could ever imagine."

He regarded him quizzically for a moment. "You won't hurt me."

“Never.”

He looked away hastily, then moved restlessly. “Even if I hurt you?”

“Well, I do recall you’ve already tried to stab me on more than one occasion,” he said dryly. “But I’m not the sort of father who would hurt his son. I would protect myself, yes, and I suppose if we were to spar, that could prove to be an issue—”

“Oh goddess, you’re weird,” he interrupted, eyes wide in disbelief. “You’re supposed to be a cold asshole, but here you are, comforting me, the kid who's tried to kill you.” Cloud laughed, wiping his eyes with his other arm. “I never imagined you to be so sappy.”

The tension in the room quickly dispersed. Cloud wouldn’t meet his gaze but Sephritoh hadn’t expected him to right now. Instead, he carefully pressed his head beneath Sephiroth’s chin, a rare moment of affection from the boy.

“Fatherhood can soften even the coldest of hearts, it seems,” he whispered into the boy’s hair.

“You’re ridiculous,” Cloud mumbled under his breath. Still, he didn’t move away.

Sephiroth understood logically that this wouldn’t be the end of these kinds of situations for them. Cloud had a lot of trauma, and Sephiroth knew, much as his own was tightly locked up and hidden away from sight. But maybe, just maybe, Cloud could be better than him in that regard. Perhaps Sephiroth acting in his son’s best interest would allow the boy a childhood that wasn't as traumatic. Cloud could be someone outside of Shinra’s next weapon like Sephiroth was and still is. Maybe he wouldn’t turn out as tainted.

And wasn't that what being a parent was all about? Wanting your child to be better than you?

Sephiroth awoke to eternity laid out before him.

It wasn't the first time Sephiroth had strange dreams, although this one felt quite realistic.

A starry skyline greeted him first, followed by barren ground that was as comfortable as it looked. Sephiroth craned his neck, taking stock of the situation. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Something was wrong. He wasn't alone here. A shift in movement behind him soon captured his full attention. Training kicked in. He rolled forward and twisted around, his hand rising before realizing his sword was not there.

"Welcome to the Edge of Creation," a voice announced, echoing through the empty landscape like a cavern.

"Thanks, but I would prefer to leave if that's okay." Sephiroth's eyes widened as he saw who was talking.

He was huge, towering over everything in sight like a god, and just as intimidating. A black wing stretched out from his right side, encircling the small floating rock Sephiroth stood on. His mirror self was dressed for battle, Masamune in one hand and a glowing sphere in the other.

It reminded him of the Ancients' paintings, regal and imposing with heavy symbolism. His expression was so unlike his own, more akin to when Sephiroth had been in the early days of the war in Wutai, ready to take on enemy combatants with a flick of his blade. It made his stomach roll in discomfort. Was this how his enemies perceived him? Like a bemused god?

Sephiroth looked down at the sleep robe and pants he wore to bed, sighing. Of course, he wasn't dressed for this. At least he wasn't naked in this dream.

"So this is what has become of us," his giant self goaded. "Pathetic."

"You're me?"

"A version of you, yes. A better one who knows the truth," he insisted, tossing the sphere up and down in his hand. "You are still attached to your mortal coil and all its failings. Reunion beckons and still you continue playing with our puppet."

Sephiroth frowned, mulling over the other's words. His gaze traveled towards the object in the giant's hand. The sphere faintly glowed, its light pulsating like a heartbeat. As he looked closer he could discern something moving inside it. A small animal? No, he realized in dawning horror, a child.

His child.

"Cloud!" He scowled, making a reach for the boy. His other self pulled the sphere away. "Give him back. What are you doing with him?"

“Isn’t he adorable? Although I much prefer his adult form, this one has its uses too. Minds at this age are so malleable.” He smirked, his eyes filled with a crazed possessiveness that made Sephiroth’s blood freeze over. His other self played with the orb, moving it back and forth with one hand as he batted Sephiroth away with his sword. “How it must disgust you to share not only S-Cells but your own flesh and blood with the monster that took everything from you. How does it feel, Cloud? Tell daddy everything.”

Sephiroth couldn’t hear his son, but he could feel him. The anguish was overwhelming, drowning out everything else. No matter how much force he put behind his fists, he couldn’t reach his son.

“Stop this!” Sephiroth yelled. Black tendrils rose from the ground, twisting around his arms and legs like snakes. Every time he tugged at them, more sprouted up, chaining him to the ground.

His other self placed the sphere on the ground next to him, taunting him, infuriating him. And yet, he could do nothing in this nightmare.

Wait.

Nightmare.

“Cloud is such a fun toy, don’t you think?” His other self passed the sphere between his hands, rolling it up and down his arms like waves on water. His gaze lifted to the stars around them. “It’s part of why I’m here, after all. But Gaia wouldn’t let me erase her champion. No, she brought him back with me. Wasn’t that kind of her?” He laughed. It was a demented sound that made Sephiroth wince. Did he sound like that? Gods, he hoped not. “It’s too bad for her I am still set on taking this world, no matter the cost.”

Sephiroth stared long and hard at his other self. The vines around him loosened. “I think I understand now.”

His other self’s satisfied smirk grew wider. “Then step aside. Our birthright calls, and I cannot keep mother–”

“You’re a figment of my imagination,” Sephiroth began, confidence growing with each word. “Born from Cloud’s little stories and too much wine last night.” His confidence grew as the black tendrils began to dissipate. “ I knew I shouldn’t have accepted that bottle from Genesis. Plus I read that research article about Perinatal OCD recently, although I didn’t expect at Cloud's age for this to be an issue. However, with my own childhood PTSD it makes sense that my subconscious would conjure this for me,” he reasoned.

The world around them stopped. Even his other self’s hair seemed suspended in the air as he looked down, brows and lips pressed together. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, well,” he amended, “Not sorry. You see, I think I understand why I dreamed you up.” The god moved back. Sephiroth stepped closer, the last of the tendrils leaving him free to move. “I’ve been so worried about my parenting skills and Cloud’s emotions that my subconscious likely put you together from my own issues with possessiveness and fear of losing control.”

“I am not simply a dream,” his other self spat out. “I am *you* .”

Sephiroth folded his arms, no longer afraid. “ Maybe you are a part of me, the part I try to keep hidden from Cloud and my friends, but you’re not all of me.”

The giant, twisted version of himself threw him a venomous look.

“Disgusting. You’ve become *weak* .”

It was Sephiroth’s turn to laugh. “No, I’ve become stronger than you’ll ever know. You’re just a *small* nightmare I thought up.”

The words seemed to have an effect as his god-like self shrank with the words. He scowled, swiping at Sephiroth with his blade but Sephiroth is faster, jumping out of range.

“What are you doing? What is this?”

“A drunken caricature made from Cloud’s little stories,” he egged on.

The figure grew smaller, dropping Cloud as he approached Sephiroth’s size.

“You cannot defeat me,” he ground out, eyes blazing. He swiped at Sephiroth again but this was his nightmare, his mindscape, thus, so long as he believed it, his other self could not land a single hit on him. “I am endless. So long as Cloud exists, then so do I!”

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. “A tiny intrusive thought in the back of my mind.”

His demented reflection decreased even more, barely more than a handful of a man. Before he could escape Sephiroth captured him, picking him up and holding him aloft.

“You fool. You would reject the truth? We are not born of this world.

Our mother came from the stars. If you refuse to join with me then your quest for truth will end in despair," he said, pointing his tiny sword. "You need me."

A flash of images flew through Sephiroth's mind, each crazier than the last. A weaker mind might have fallen for such a trick, but Sephiroth was stronger than that. "Whether what you say is true remains to be seen," he replied coldly, giving this version of himself an unimpressed look. "The fact remains: I don't need you like you seem to need me. You make yourself look big, but I can see what you really are, a mere shade of the person I am."

The words seemed to engage his tinier self, stabbing at his hands with wild abandon. It would have hurt if it hadn't been a dream, Sephiroth thought. But that was all this was: a bad dream.

"I won't disappear. I'll always be there in the back of your mind. You cannot escape me," his other self said spitefully.

Sephiroth merely rolled his eyes. He willed his dream to form a box in his hand. Slowly, he encased his other self inside it. "Of course not. I know myself. I've read enough parenting guides and psychology journals these past few months to know how complex the human mind is," he answered as his nightmarish self was slowly imprisoned. "You are just a reflection of my loneliness and anger borne from my own issues. I have far too much love for myself, my family, and my friends to ever give in to the darkest parts of myself." He closed the box and pushed. Slowly, it floated away into the Edge of Creation or whatever his subconscious called it.

"Goodbye and goodnight," he remarked as the world broke apart.

Sephiroth woke up suddenly, not because of any noise but merely because the nightmare-turned-dream had reached its conclusion, leaving him with a dry throat and cold sweats. Rain trickled down the window by his bedside, a flash of lightning illuminating the bedroom.

Glowing eyes stared at him through the darkness. Sephiroth startled for a moment before realizing the owner of said eyes. His shoulders relaxed.

Cloud stood at the side of his bed, head barely above the covers. He looked confused like he wasn't sure why he was there either. They stared at each other, not sure of what to say.

Sephiroth spoke first. "Cloud." He eyed the clock. "What is it? It's two am."

His son hugged his pillow, looking away as if in thought. After a minute, he finally answered softly, "I had a nightmare."

"Hm. I've had one, too," he mumbled, rubbing at his eyelids. No more wine before bedtime, he thought grimly.

"Can I…" Cloud stopped. His face flushed. "This is stupid. It was just a nightmare. I should be over this by now."

"What do you need?"

Cloud sighed, looking up at him with a cautious glare. “Promise you won’t laugh.”

He nodded, still half awake. “I promise.”

Vulnerability peeked through the edges of Cloud’s expression. “Can I sleep with you tonight, dad?”

The bed dipped slightly. Sephiroth concealed his surprise as the boy joined him. It was…not unwelcome, just unexpected.

Sephiroth went through his mental notes. A child having a nightmare and seeking affection from his parent was a step in the right direction, right? Additionally, he was calling him ‘dad’, which made Sephiroth immensely pleased whenever he heard the word directed towards him. *Yes,* he mentally reasoned, *this was good* . This was progress. He internally patted himself on the back for clearing this parental hurtle after eight long months.

“Of course,” he responded softly, settling down on his side as he made room.

Thankfully, Cloud was fairly small, taking up only half of Sephiroth’s pillow as he settled in. He flipped back and forth, trying to find a comfortable position. It was darling. Part of him wanted to take out his PHS for a photo but he resisted. Perhaps in the morning if Cloud was still asleep, but not now.

“Dad,” Cloud whispered.

“Yes?”

“Thanks,” he paused before patting Sephiroth on the head. He quickly turned away to sleep on his side, though not without mumbling, “For everything.”

Sephiroth smiled as he drifted back to sleep.

Things calmed down after that night, or as calm as they could be with his son around. Cloud was still Cloud, after all. Nonetheless, Sephiroth noticed a significant change in their interactions. The child approached him at a greater frequency, initiating hugs and, more often than not, calling him ‘dad’ rather than his usual name. Not that Sephiroth minded at all. In fact, he much preferred it. Except from Genesis. He might have to throw the man through a wall again if he kept making ridiculous nicknames like “General Dad” and “Silver Daddy”. The man so enjoyed ruining Sephiroth’s small wins in parenthood.

That was why he wasn’t surprised to see the man in the room overlooking the Third Class training hall, although Zack and Angeal's presence was unusual. “What are you three doing?”

“Cloud-watching,” Genesis replied, not even looking at the man. “*When the war of the beasts brings about the world's end, The goddess descends from the sky*.”

“What does that even mean?” Zack asked aloud. No one answered him. It was simply Genesis being Genesis.

“He’s directing the Thirds in materia usage,” Angeal remarked, rubbing his chin. “It’s quite informative.”

“Go Spikey go! You can do it!” Zack cheered despite Cloud not being able to hear them. The one-way glass window allowed for people to watch without freaking out the students, or so Angeal once said.

Sephiroth turned his head at the word, lips pursed. “Spikey?”

“New nickname. You know, because of the hair,” Zack replied.

Genesis raised an eyebrow. “How many does he have now?”

Sephiroth peered down. His son was at the front of the room atop one of the platforms, watching and correcting the Thirds whenever one of them made a mistake with their materia. As entertaining as it was to watch his child call out men three times his size, he couldn't help but ask, “Why is my son teaching down there and not any of you?”

Angeal and Genesis looked amongst each other before pointing out the culprit. Zack gawked. “Wow, some real SOLDIER loyalty there, you guys.”

“Technically this is Zack’s first class to teach as a new First,” Angeal said with a hint of disapproval.

“Yo, chill, Cloud’s my assistant instructor. I taught them the basics, and Cloud is watching over them,” Zack explained.

Sephiroth gave him a sidelong glance of utter disbelief. “He’s *five* .”

“Hey, hey, hey, everyone knows he thinks and acts like a tiny adult,” Zack defended. “Most of the time, anyway.”

Genesis snorted. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

“ He’s totally got this. Aw, look, he’s teaching one of the Thirds how to infuse magic into their sword,” Zack gushed.

Sephiroth internally rolled his eyes. “What sparked the interest in teaching?”

“He says his dream is to make sure people don’t die from stupidity,” Zack said proudly, hitting a fist to his chest.

Angeal nodded. “A good dream.”

“More like an impossible one. Wasn’t the SOLDIER handbook written in the blood of Third Class members?” Genesis pointed out.

“Ha, *ha* , Genesis,” Zack retorted.

“That’s General Rhapsodos to you,” Genesis retorted. “We’re on the clock, after all.”

The conversation likely would have devolved from there had one of the Third Class SOLDIERs not yelled out to Cloud from across the room.

“Excuse me! Little General! Little General, how much longer do we need to practice with Ice? No offense, but can we work with something else?” A lone man asked, barely hiding his laughter.

Genesis was the first to speak, cackling, “Oh dear goddess, did he just call him—”

“What did you just say?” Cloud replied, face expressionless, although Sephiroth’s parental instincts knew better. He could tell the boy was pissed. If there was one thing Cloud got annoyed with the most, it was people comparing him to Sephiroth. That and all the short jokes.

Sephiroth took a seat, nursing his morning coffee. He had a feeling there would be lots of paperwork after this. There was no point praying to the Goddess as she had clearly abandoned him a long time ago. No doubt Sephiroth’s sanity would be next on the list today, if it hadn’t already left him.

“Little General, sir. It’s the nickname Roche came up with,” the SOLDIER expressed.

Cloud stood up straighter, pointing his sword into the crowd. “Roche.”

Ah. Annoyance flared as Sephiroth recognized the man. His child’s kidnapper. Was there a way to demote him further? Sephiroth would have to inquire from the Director.

“Yessire, Little General,” Roche replied, giving him a half-hearted salute.

“Zack. You should probably get down there,” Sephiroth said.

Zack gave him a puzzled look. “Huh? Why?”

“Are you bored with playing with Ice too?” Cloud folded his arms together.

“Well, it’s not like I haven’t used this materia before in the field,” Roche joked. “We’re big boys, sir. You can take off the kid gloves.”

“Very well. Let’s move on to our next lesson then,” Cloud replied, pulling a small sphere from his pocket.

“What’s that in his hand?” Zack asked aloud, peering closer to the window.

Angeal’s eyes narrowed, his body already halfway off his seat. “Is that a summon?”

“Ah-ha, so that’s where my Ifrit went,” Genesis mentioned airly as Zack ran from the room. He settled into his seat as Angeal followed Zack, leaving the other two behind. He gave Sephiroth a knowing smirk.

Sephiroth sighed.

Cloud popped the summon into his bracelet with a flourish. “We’re going to play a little game I call dodgeball.”

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